

Iowa Barns • Letters from the Western Trails • Iowa's 1858 Gold Rush • Billy Sunday  
Spring 2003 • \$6

# Iowa Heritage

ILLUSTRATED





# Front Porch

Dear Readers:

Distance makes the heart grow frantic.

Fonder, too, perhaps, but frantic if you're at all like me. My husband travels a lot, and I always need his immediate reassurance that he has reached his destination safely.

Imagine, then, the thoughts going through my worrying little head as I met the Stagemans, a family scattered between Council Bluffs and California in the 1850s, a family you'll meet in this issue. The need to keep in touch, to know that all are safe, is practically palpable in their letters. How good we have it today! How much worry and anxiety must have resided in Americans' hearts during the great westward migrations of the 19th century.

Speaking of westward migrations, an actual barn migrated west to Iowa a few years ago. Have you gotten a chance yet to see this wonder, the thatch-roofed German *hausbarn* in Manning? I did just a few months ago and snapped this picture. (It doesn't do the structure justice, so be sure to go see this amazing barn yourself.) I was delighted



to find out that the 350-year-old barn came from Schleswig-Holstein, the stomping ground of my German ancestors. In 1996, the dismantled barn was shipped to Manning, a town founded in 1881 by immigrants from Schleswig-Holstein. In 1999 volunteers working under a German master carpenter reconstructed it. *Hausbarns* were living quarters for both livestock and people. I wonder if any of my ancestors in Schleswig-Holstein ever called such a structure "home."

As a farm kid, I thought all barns looked like the one on our family farm in Scott County. But Michael Harker's fine photographs in this issue attest to the great variety of Iowa barns—and their stunning forms—and historian Loren Horton reminds us of their essential functions.

How our state's traditional barns can be made to serve new functions today, and therefore hold their place on our physical and economic landscapes, depends on the resources, imagination, hard work, and, in some cases, pure heroics of Iowans like you and me. It breaks my heart to see the death of a barn, even though I understand the demanding financial realities of keeping them in good repair. But an Iowa without its traditional barns? How could such a place exist?

Michael Harker's barn photos in this issue are only a sampling of his work behind the camera and in the darkroom. You'll find more of his fabulous photography in his new book, *Harker's Barns: Visions of an American Icon*.

And remember the wonderful photos of rural Iowa by A. M. "Pete" Wettach in this magazine a few years ago? We featured one of the photos on the cover (right). Author Leslie Loveless then culled the extensive Wettach photo collection at the State Historical Society of Iowa for an entire book, *A Bountiful Harvest: The Midwestern Farm Photographs of Peter Wettach, 1925-1965*. Both books can be ordered from or purchased at the State Historical Society's museum store in Des Moines. Drop by the store at 600 E. Locust, or call 515-283-1757, or shop online at [www.iowahistory.org](http://www.iowahistory.org). Store hours are Tuesday-Saturday, 9-4:30; Sunday 12-4:30. If you love Iowa books, this is the store for you. If you love Iowa, this is the store for you, too.

I hope you enjoy this issue.

—Ginalie Swaim, editor

## Iowa Heritage Illustrated

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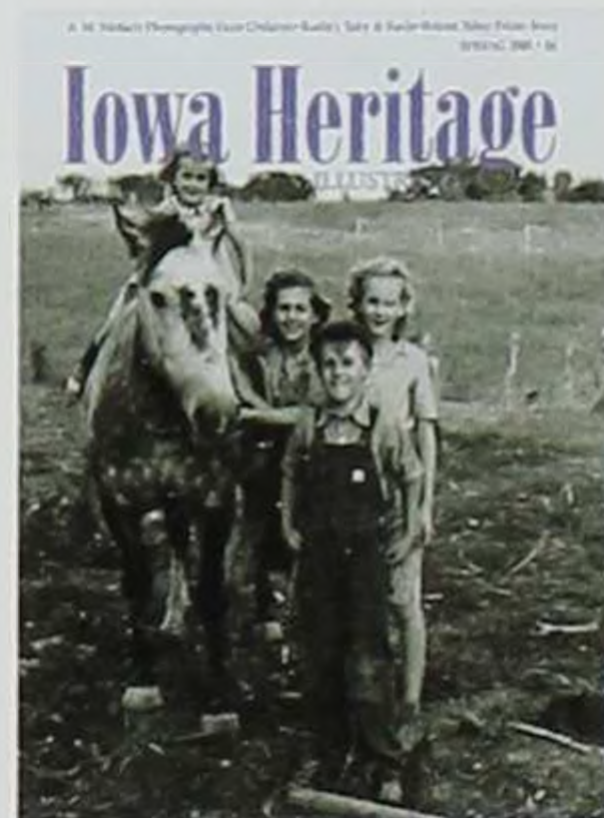
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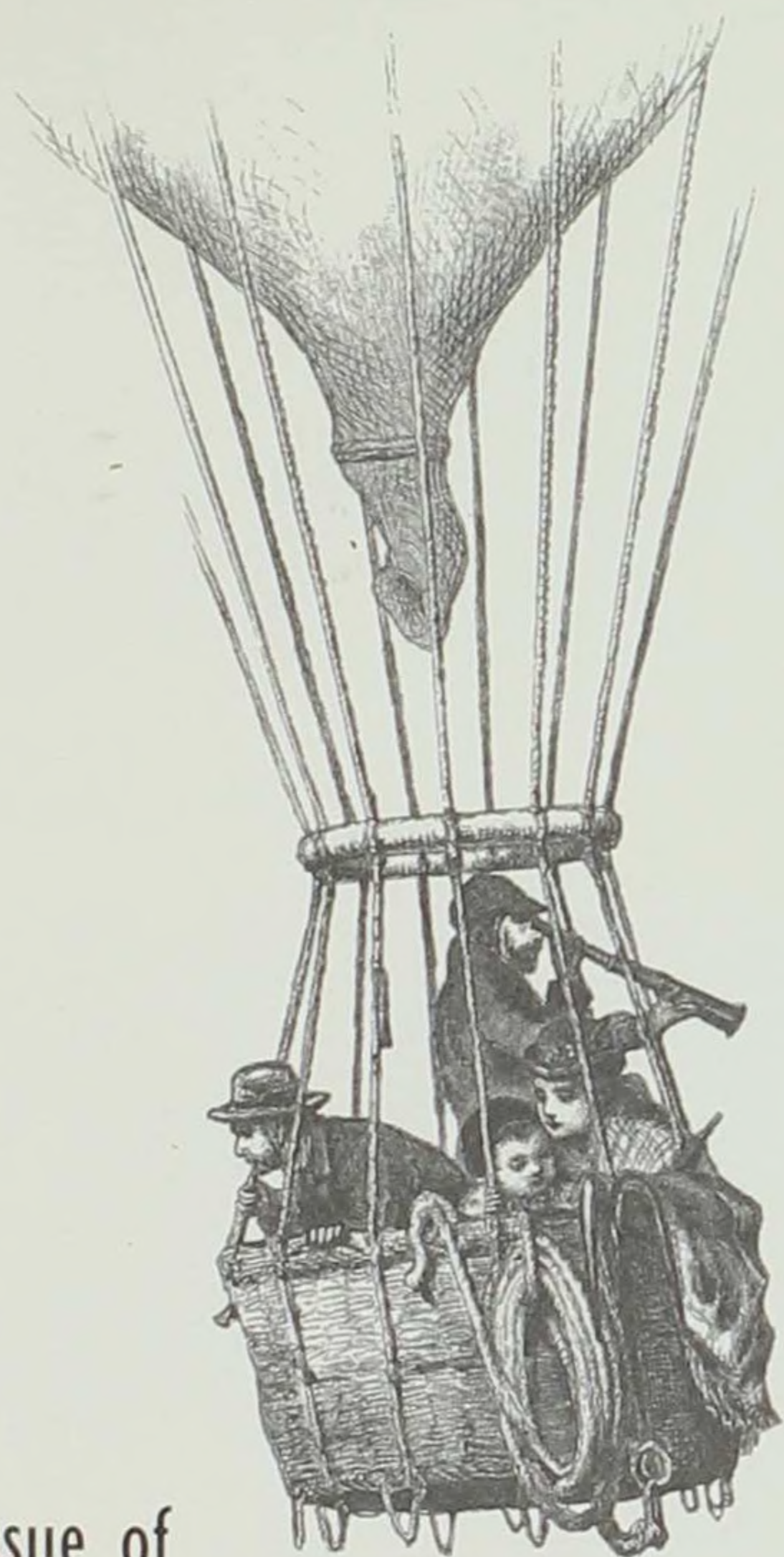
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# Heritage

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Spring 2003, Vol. 84, No. 1



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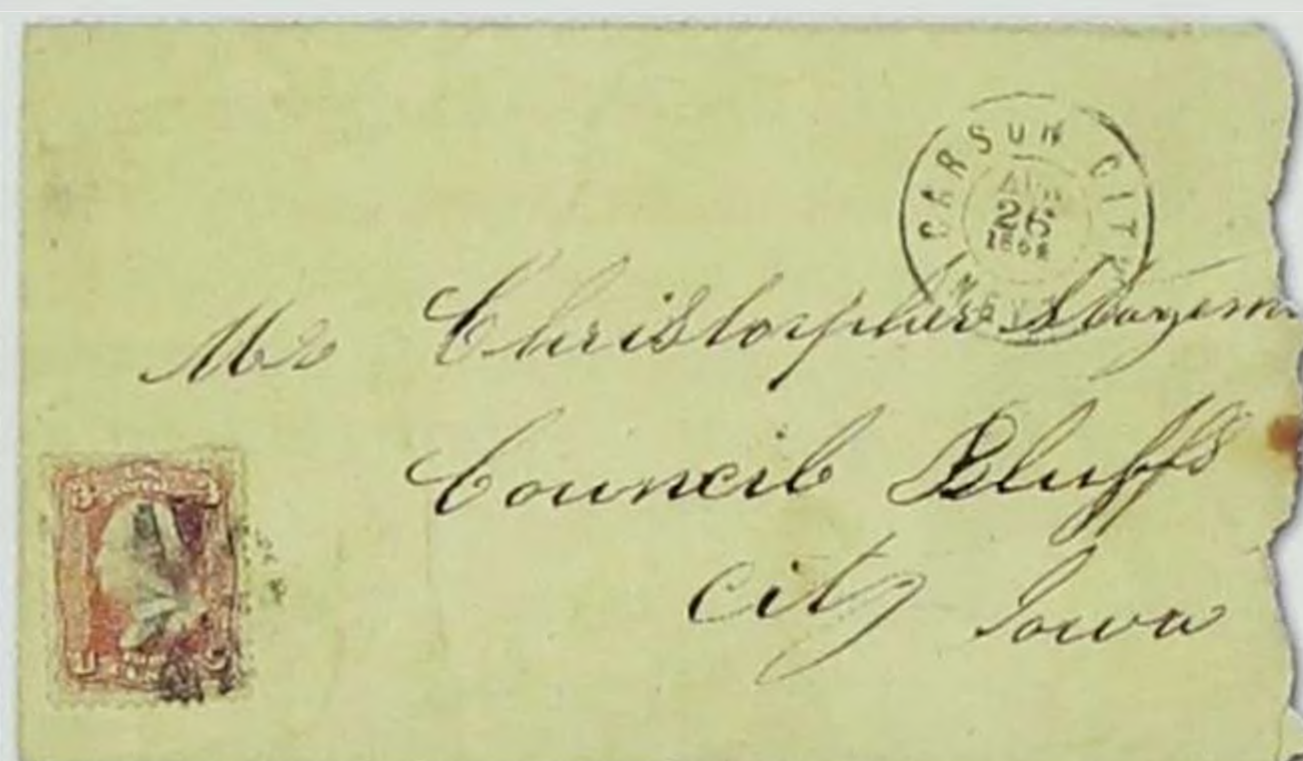


# Iowa Heritage

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Formerly The Palimpsest

Spring 2003, Vol. 84, No. 1



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## On the Cover

Photographer Michael P. Harker captured this stunning image of a corncrib in Henry County, Iowa, in 2001. Farm buildings are some of the most familiar structures in Iowa, but sometimes it takes a photographer to show us their true beauty. In this issue, Harker shares his vision of Iowa's barns and his thoughts on why they are so significant, and historian Loren Horton explains how they have changed over the years.



# Iowa Eldorado

## Searching for Gold in 1858

by Eric Lana

**A**s Iowans sat down to read their newspapers in the spring of 1858, a sudden glimmer of hope seemed to brighten the hard economic times that plagued the nation.

The story began because Iowa farmer Jeremiah Hewitt also caught a glimmer of something bright. Hewitt was prospecting for coal on his 48-acre farm eight miles north of Osceola, in Clarke County. Instead of coal he found gold.

"He struck a small vein of black sand and quartz rock, which upon examination, was found to contain gold," a Mr. Eldridge wrote to the Burlington *Daily Hawk-Eye*, where the story appeared on March 20. Eldridge was certain "there is no humbug about it."

"Several Californians have since visited the place and tested it, and pronounce it pure gold. Men are engaged in digging," Eldridge added. "Great excitement prevails."

The same day that the story appeared in the *Hawk-Eye*, the *Winterset Madisonian* reported discoveries of gold in Madison and Adair Counties. Within five days, citizens in Davenport and Dubuque were reading the exciting news in their own papers.

By mid-April, according to Osceola's postmaster Ridgway, "a company of some 50 hands [was] at work turning South River" and building a dam and a race. "There are others making good wages, digging in the hills bordering the streams."

So began the mad scramble for gold in a new Eldorado—Iowa.

**J**udging from the newspapers, gold seemed to be just about everywhere. Twenty-three-year-old Benjamin Sears went looking for it along the Maquoketa River, about a mile north of his family's mill. He found it, a Dubuque paper reported, "in every pan of dirt he washed out."

Jonas Keck discovered gold in a slough west of

Sigourney, in Keokuk County. "Mr. Keck spent several years in the gold mines of California," papers said, "and ever since his return has had an abiding faith that the pure metal would be found in many localities in Iowa."

Gold appeared ten miles outside Burlington, on Mud Creek. There, some 50 or more eager gold hunters wanted to tear down "Hall's old Mill" and look for more deposits. The owners resisted; trouble was anticipated.

In Clarke and Madison Counties, gold was showing up "in almost every slough branch."

Farmer Jacob Glass in Marshall County found "a fine specimen of gold bearing quartz . . . near his own residence." Glass must have been startled to find gold there, especially since there were no major waterways in his township, and not even a creek on his 160 acres.

Maquoketa mayor Jonas Clark found "yellow shining particles, very much resembling gold dust, which he dug from the bottom of his cellar, beneath his store room, immediately under the Excelsior office," the paper reported. "Mr. C. has no doubt but this is the pure 'rhino,' and he feels quite confident that large quantities of it may be got by a little more excavation, and by sinking deeper. If this discovery should prove to be a paying one, we may expect soon to see our streets, alleys, and vacant lots dug over into hills and hollows."

In Ottumwa, the same concern surfaced. On a Monday, gold was discovered there. On Tuesday, despite near-constant rain, "a hundred men, perhaps more, were busy in most of the ravines and gulches. . . . It would seem that here, almost in the heart of our city, in every part of our bluff through which a stream penetrates, and in all the ravines about us there is gold."

At the diggings in Burlington, "a great many people were there, and a great many boys, with their pantaloons rolled up very high and very tight, prospecting with tin cups, dippers, gourds, broken skillets, old shoes, cow's horns, broken crockery ware, dilapidated hats, &c., &c. Further up, washers, cradles, and other ingenious machines were . . . [separating] the shining dust



from the common earth. . . . Such a shaking, and scratching and digging and washing, was never seen since the whiteman first crossed the Mississippi. Spades, shovels, hoes, sharp sticks, &c., were used in tossing over the old bones, hair, gravel and sand."

In Iowa City, "mechanics, merchants and laboring men are making exhaustive preparations to dig themselves rich immediately if not sooner."

According to the widespread declarations of gold published in Iowa's newspapers, digging and panning for gold occurred mainly in two distinct regions: the eastern third of the state, and central and south-central Iowa. Some editors, skeptical of "dame Rumor," took care to attribute their reports of gold to "reliable gentlemen" or to "returned Californians" (every town seemed to have a few forty-niners whose experience in the goldfields qualified them as experts in identifying gold or likely places to hunt for it). The cautious *Burlington Hawk-Eye* reported on the "considerable excitement" in town: "Dams have been commenced—races dug, and small streams turned from their channels." But the newspaper still wanted verification from a mint in the East, even though "our own citizens [are] hardly likely to get into a fever about nothing."

Newspapers carefully described the form in which the specimens were found: most often "mixed with black sand" or associated with "rotten" or "decomposed" quartz. But was it the real thing?

**G**old made its way into Iowa about 2.5 million years ago. As Paul Garvin explains in *Iowa's Minerals*, glaciers from Canada and Minnesota "scoured weathered granite outcrops and brought small amounts of gold along with rocks and primarily silicate minerals" like quartz and magnetite.

Over time, through weathering and erosion, rocks were slowly broken down and minerals swept into waterways. The gold settled as sediment along with other material of similar size and density, such as magnetite (sometimes called "black sand"), creating what miners would call "placer deposits."

So, yes, there was gold in Iowa—and it was attracting everyone from "inveterate loafers who have never been known to pass an industrious hour at any honest employment" to "men of profitable business [who now] have

appealed to the earth, with spade and pick-axe," as the *Waverly Republican* described them.

Sometimes the gold was the size of a grain of wheat or the head of a pin. Often it was much smaller. Most newspaper reports agreed that successful gold seekers were making \$2 to \$5 a day, "with an occasional 'ten strike.'" This was good money, according to historian Merle Davis. Harvest laborers in Davenport that year were paid \$1 plus board for a 15-hour day (half the rate earned the previous year); heavy rains ruined much of Iowa's wheat and oats, and the hard financial times only worsened the situation for Iowans. But like many papers reporting on the gold discoverers, the *Burlington Hawk-Eye* often asked the question: "Will it pay for digging? Ah! there's the bite."

**More Gold Found.**—A gentleman yesterday afternoon exhibited to us a specimen of gold-bearing quartz, picked up near the Catfish, in this township. "If this court is any Judge of quartz, and she think she ar," the golp was genuine. Now for a rush to the gold diggins! Dubuque county has never been behind any of her sister counties in any natural or unnatural productions—tall corn, big pumpkins, long squashes, Democratic voters, or wild Irishmen—and she will not be behind any of them in gold. We expect soon to hear of the discovery of an immense placer where one hundred dollars a day can be made with two boys and an old wash pan.

Seriously, however, there is good reason to believe that gold in considerable quantities is to be found in this county. We have long known that upon a certain farm in Jefferson township, owned by a gentleman who has worked in the gold regions of other countries, gold did exist—and we know no reason why it should not be found in other places in the county. Perhaps the golden age is about to dawn again.

*Dubuque Daily Times*, May 22, 1858



The *Davenport Daily Gazette* answered wryly: "We presume no one man has yet found enough to purchase a meal's victuals."

**S**till, times were hard, following the national Panic of 1857, and hunting for gold held promise. The economic downturn, the extensive coverage by Iowa newspapers, and plain old curiosity and hope motivated many Iowans to join the search. "We think that there are many persons in various parts of the country now out of employment, who could make sufficient out of the business [of gold seeking] to procure for themselves the necessities of life, with the *chance* of making more," a Davenport newspaper ventured.

Yet Iowa newspapers also cautioned against the lure of easy riches. The *Waverly Republican* advised, "Let those who have nothing to do go to dig, but let no man leave his occupation to look after the gold diggings." The *Republican* also reprinted advice from a Chicago paper: "We trust the good people of Iowa will not run wild with the idea that their State is to be a rival of California. It would be a misfortune if a country so magnificently endowed for purposes of agriculture should have its development retarded by a chase after gold, which never, except in a few rare cases, pays so well as raising potatoes."

As in any gold rush, merchants and tradespeople may have had the most to gain, especially if it brought new people into the state. Some newspapers, playing their important role of town booster, claimed that it did. "Steamboats arriving at [Des Moines] bring with them gold seekers from all parts of the country," the *Waverly Republican* said in late May. The *Marietta Express* reprinted reports that "a large tide of emigration from Indiana and Illinois is pouring into the gold region" in Clarke and adjoining counties. Another paper reported "hundreds from Ohio, Pennsylvania &c."

An influx of people into Iowa would bring a demand for supplies and services, especially important after the Panic of 1857 had depressed prices and stalled railroad and town development. But Iowa editors advertised the promise of fertile soil of Iowa much more than the lure of gold. "Come to Iowa," a Davenport

paper enticed its distant readers. "Our soil is rich in every respect, and gold can be dug from it in more ways than one."

Not everyone wanted a gold rush in Iowa. The *Waverly Republican* foresaw a flood of "adventurers of all classes seeking quick and violent fortunes." A Dubuque paper worried over a "stampede . . . of all that is least worthy, least desirable." The *Clinton Herald* warned of "fools, mad men, and thieves."

"We mourn for Iowa," the *New York Tribune* wailed, in a story reprinted in Dubuque. "No State in the Union has made greater or more rapid advances in population, morality, intelligence, thrift than she has. . . . Though times are hard with her people, as with almost all others, she has an admirable soil and a most industrious, energetic, intelligent people, and was about to work gradually and healthfully out of her difficulties."

"But a great trial, a great peril, has suddenly assailed her. Her future, but yesterday so hopeful, is now over-

## More Gold.

**We have previously noticed the report finding of gold in Hardon County, and are now satisfied these reports are true. Mr. Stephen G. Crane, formerly of Vinton but now of Steamboat Rock writes us enclosing a specimen that was obtained "from a single pan full of earth, and is poer in comparison with what has been found." This specimen we hand to Mr. Jhon A. Bills, jeweler and goldsmith who subjected is to every known test and pronoces it pure gold. Mr. Crane says a number of peaces worth 25 cents have been found, and one ungget worth \$2.16 dug out a mile abouve the town. The existenco of gold in Hardih can no Joger be donbted, but in remains to be seen wheather mining for wiil be remunerative.—[Vinton Eagle.**

*Waverly Republican, June 5, 1858*

cast and gloomy. Gold has been found on her soil!" Now, the *Tribune* warned, on the "heels of the digger" would come "the whiskey-seller, the dicer, the drab."

Heavy rains and high streams that spring and summer hindered the search for gold, although, as one paper quipped, "the present is an excellent time for wash-



ing, as there is an abundance of water pretty much everywhere." From April through July, 28 inches of rain saturated Iowa City, twice the average of the four surrounding years. In Hardin County, "high water is obstructing the progress of the miners; . . . a great many say that they are making fair wages, with a prospect of doing better as soon as the water subsides."

As summer progressed, reports kept coming in of gold in new places: in Lucas, Decatur, Henry, and Delaware Counties. Near Saylorville and Story City. Panora, Decorah, Danville, and Adel. Steamboat Rock and Strawberry Point. Fort Dodge attorney John Duncombe, rowing by Boonesboro and Millford on his way to Des Moines, observed "the wild gold excitement here" and noted it in his diary. "Every body was hunting gold."

Then he added what all Iowa was finding out: "Small particles were found in many places, but not enough worth digging for."

**I**owa's 1858 gold rush died late that summer—barely four months since the first exciting reports, and just as gold was discovered in Colorado. "The gold excitement in Iowa has lulled as suddenly as it started," the *Davenport Gazette* noted in late July. "No one seems to have been injured by it but a few who left their homes in the East to become rich without labor by digging gold in our fertile State. Now and then we still read of small particles being discovered . . . but in no case does it yield as profitably as digging potatoes."

"The 'gold hunters' around Des Moines who were going to turn the Coon, or some other river, or creek, from its bed, and make an everlasting fortune, have broken up," the *Davenport Daily Morning News* observed on August 2. "Thus dies one of the greatest 'discoveries' of the age. There is more money made at Des Moines by turning the stream of State revenue from its channel than in any other way."

Maybe the *Morning News* had said it all back in mid-May: "We have gold here in another shape; we have it in the agricultural wealth of our rich prairie soil." ❖

*Eric Lana is a graduate student in public history at Middle Tennessee State University and has worked at the State Historical Society as an archivist and researcher.*

#### NOTE ON SOURCES

Citations and print-outs from Iowa newspapers of 1858 of news items about gold discoveries are held in the *Iowa Heritage Illustrated* production files (SHSI-Iowa City). Harvest wages in Davenport are from Merle Davis, "Wheat, Work, and Wages: The Iowa Experience, 1856-1865" (unpublished manuscript). Other sources include: Paul Garvin, *Iowa's Minerals: Their Occurrence, Origins, Industries, and Lore* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1998), and William J. Petersen, "Gold on the Prairie," *The Palimpsest*, 34:12 (December 1958), 556-59.

## Was gold discovered in your county in 1858? Check the newspapers!

You might say that Eric Lana, the author of this article, had something in common with gold-hunting Iowans in 1858. He, too, was searching for gold—but he was looking for it in old Iowa newspapers.

In the last few years, while researching the underground railroad in Iowa with researcher John Zeller, Eric Lana has pored over dozens and dozens of Iowa newspapers from the 1850s. Frequent mention of gold discoveries in 1858 caught his eye and led to further research. He found well over one hundred news items about gold being discovered in Iowa.

Of the 39 counties where gold discoveries were reported, most were in the eastern third of the state: Lee, Des Moines, Louisa, Muscatine, Scott, Clinton, Jackson, Dubuque, Clayton, Davis, Van Buren, Henry, Wapello, Mahaska, Keokuk, Cedar, Johnson, Iowa, Linn, Jones, Delaware, Buchanan, Winneshiek, Bremer, and Floyd Counties. The others were in central and south-central Iowa: Decatur, Lucas, Clarke, Union, Warren, Madison, Adair, Guthrie, Dallas, Polk, Marshall, Story, Boone, and Hardin Counties.

Lana is quick to point out that there may well have been gold discoveries reported in other Iowa counties. After all, he doesn't claim to have read every Iowa newspaper from 1858. In western Iowa, for example, many counties were still being organized in 1858, were sparsely populated, and had far fewer newspapers.

Although gold was indeed found in Iowa, the real treasure, for those of us who love Iowa history, are the extensive collections of Iowa newspapers at the State Historical Society of Iowa's research libraries in Iowa City and Des Moines. Some date as far back as the 1830s and 1840s. Those on microfilm can be borrowed through interlibrary loan. Make the request through your local library. For more information, call 515-281-8741 (Des Moines) or 319-335-3916. Or check our Web site: [www.iowahistory.org/library](http://www.iowahistory.org/library)

Iowa newspapers from the last two centuries are goldmines of information about local, state, and national events and attitudes. Whether you're curious about the 1860s—or the 1960s—you'll take great treasures, and pleasures, from reading newspapers from the past.

—The Editor



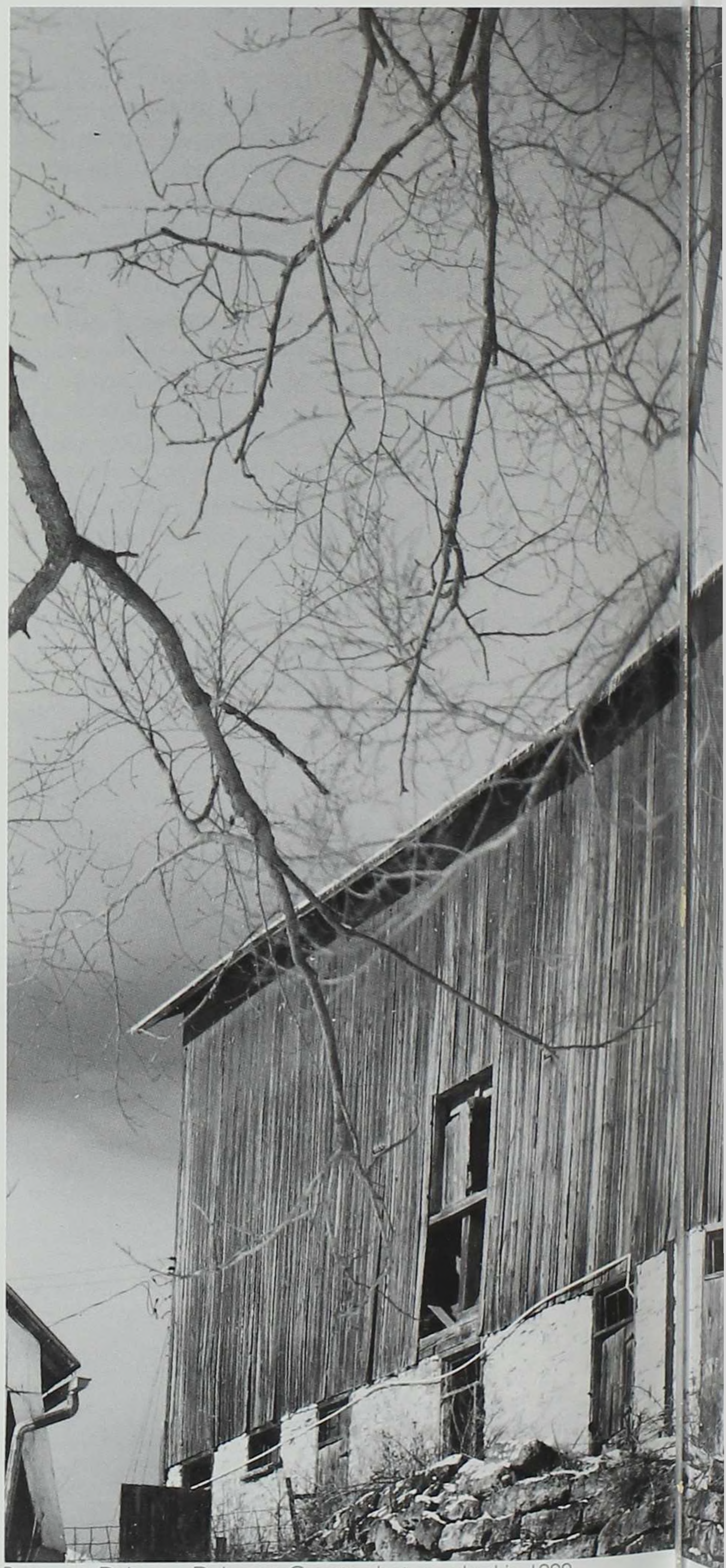
# Iowa's Barns

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## Form & Function

■ Photos by Michael P. Harker

■ Text by Loren N. Horton



Barn near Dubuque, Dubuque County, photographed in 1999





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# Iowa's Barns

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## Form & Function

■ Photos by Michael P. Harker

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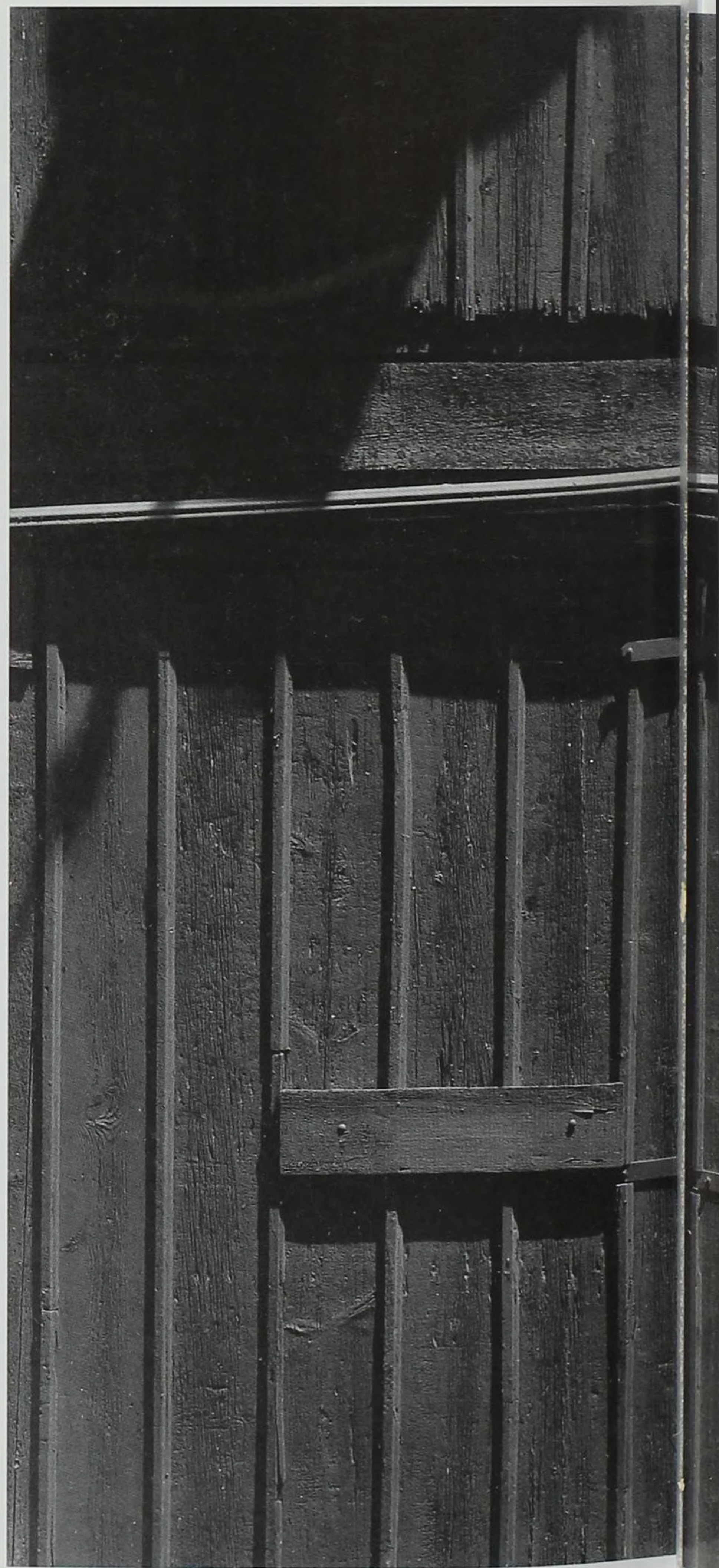


Barn near Dubuque, Dubuque County, photographed in 1999

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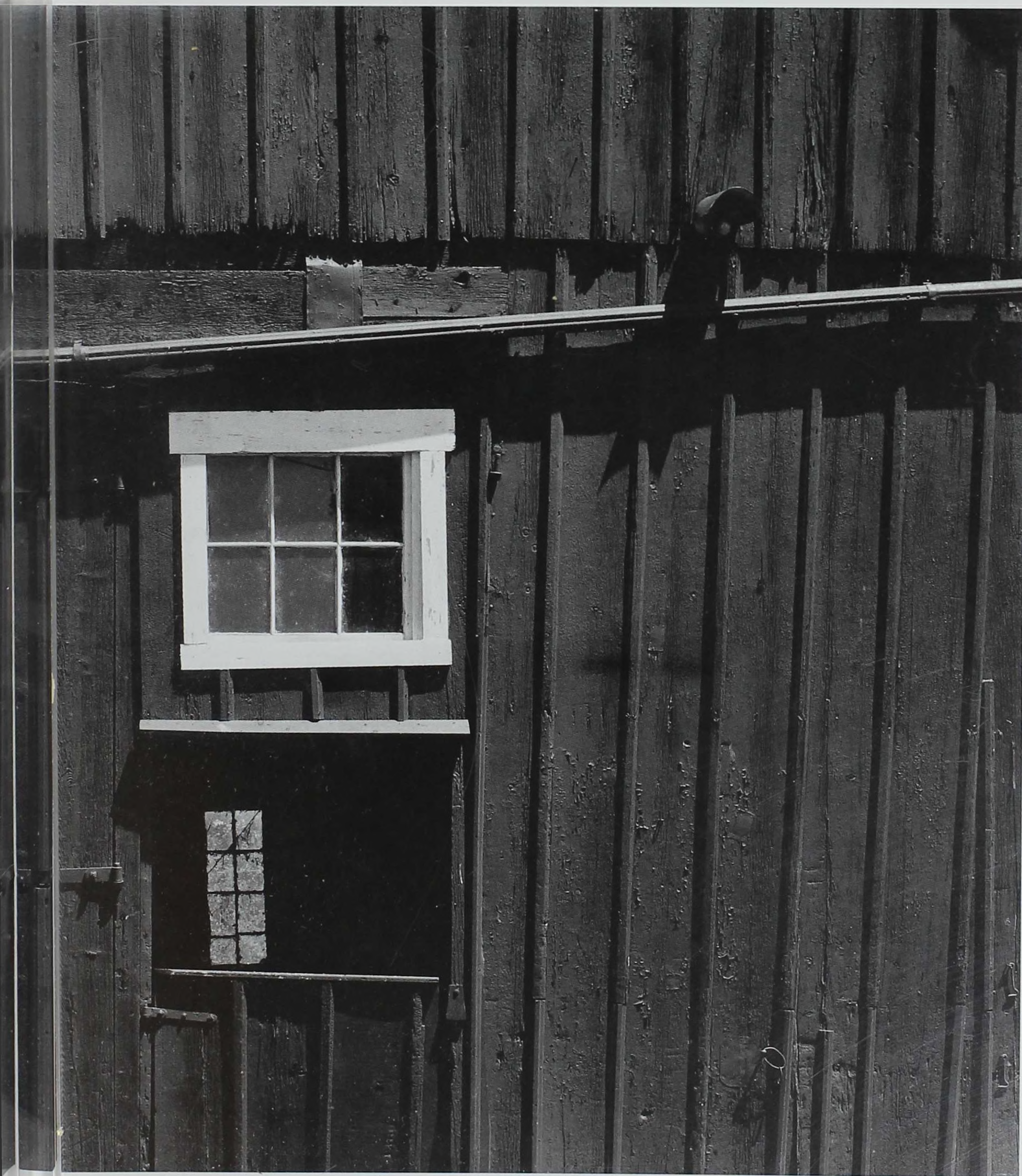


Barns are not unique to Iowa, to the Midwest, to the United States, or to any other particular part of the world. Wherever there have been farms and farmers, there have been barns. Barns fulfill a certain function on a farm. When that function becomes obsolete, then so does the barn. Barns have been constructed in a wide variety of architectural styles, using a wide variety of building materials. The old dictum that form follows function is true of barns, to a certain extent, but there are many other factors that determine just what sort of barn is constructed on a particular farm. Barns, like the people who built them, exhibit traits of individuality. The traditions familiar to the farmer are also primary considerations. In Iowa's barns, we see both tradition and change, form and function.



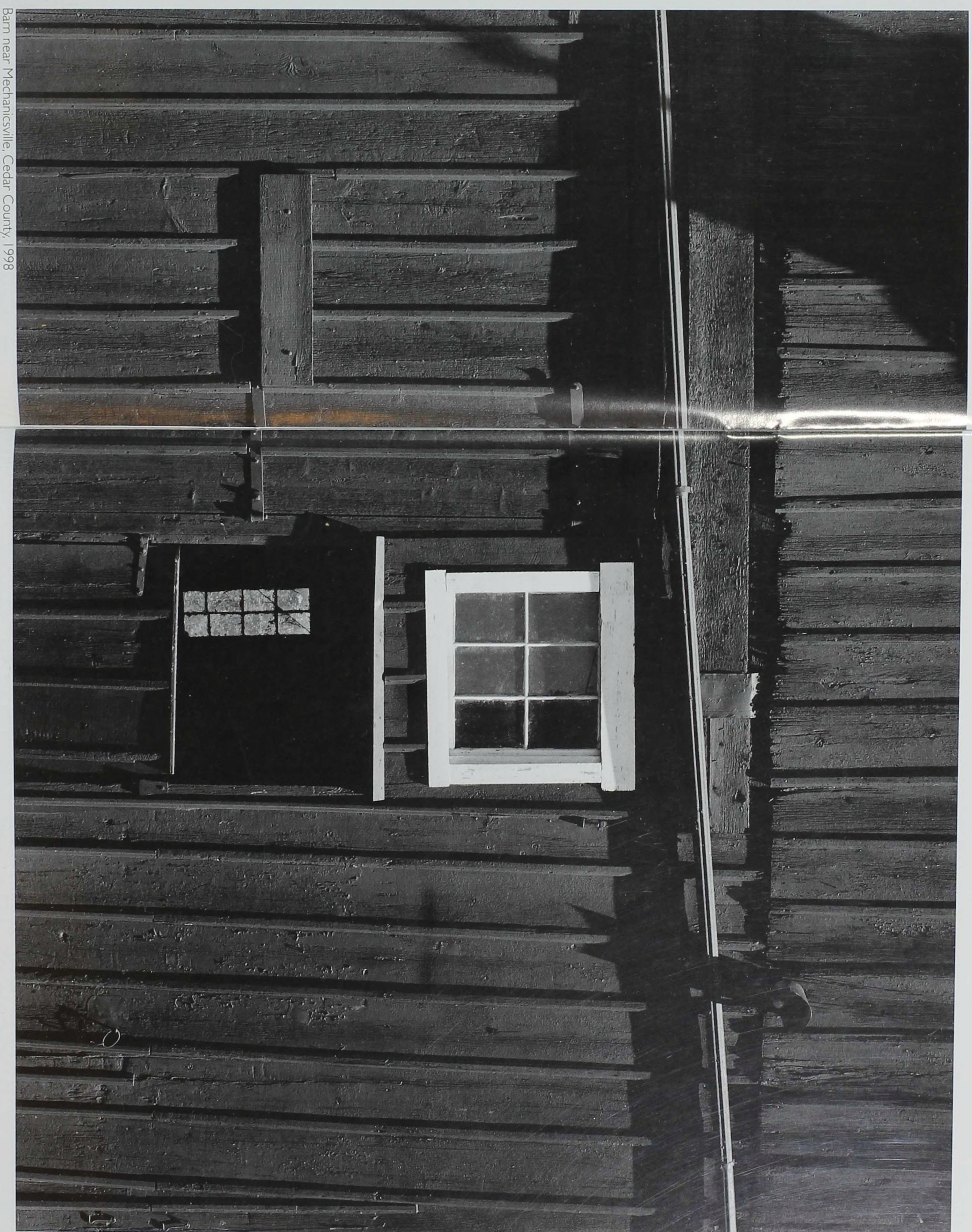
Barn near Mechanicsville, Cedar County, 1998







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Barn near Mechanicsville, Cedar County, 1998





Limestone barn near Charles City, Floyd County, 2000

In many parts of Europe, the barn was combined with other outbuildings. Sometimes they were even combined with the dwelling for the people, in structures known as "housebarns." There was a great deal of practicality involved in such a structure, because the welfare of the animals and the storage of food products were essential to the survival of the farm family. Joining these functions into one elongated structure ensured that the people were close to both the animals and the food supply in times of inclement weather. The warmth of the animals also helped to keep the people warm.

This limestone barn south of Charles City is an Iowa example of what some of the more elaborate European housebarns looked like. Though it is unlikely that it was used in this way in Floyd County, the farmer who built this barn (or who had it built) may have had European traditions in mind.









Limestone barn near Charles City, Floyd County, 2000

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Barn near North Liberty, Johnson County, 2001

Barn fires were something to be dreaded. A fire could easily burn down the entire barn before enough people could assemble from neighboring farms to help put the fire out. Not only was the building lost, so was the hay it stored, and all too often the animals it sheltered. The lightning rods on this barn roof are one of the methods farmers used to guard against fires started by lightning strikes.

Because hay stored in a barn has a tendency to pack down and heat up in the curing process, spontaneous combustion was not uncommon and was another cause of barn fires. Ventilation was vital so that the hay would dry thoroughly. Rooftop ventilators, cupolas, and louvered windows like the ones on this barn were all ways of bringing air into the mow. Another technique was to scatter salt through the loose hay in the mow to speed up the drying.

The long, low roof visible on this side of the structure is typical of shed barns. This attached roof provided additional shelter for animals outside the barn.





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The long, low roof visible on this side of the structure is typical of shed barns. This attached roof provided additional shelter for animals outside the barn.



Although the majority of Iowa's barns were rectangular in shape, octagon barns enjoyed a brief period of popularity in the 1880s among more experimentally minded farmers, especially after they were promoted by Lowan Lorenzo S. Coffin and agricultural journals.

One of the finest examples of an octagon barn in Iowa is the Secrest Barn, near Downey, now being restored to its original splendor by Rich Tyler. Built in 1883 by George Frank Longerbeam, the barn is notable for the octagonal cupola, the number of windows in the side walls, the elaborate circular hay track and hay distribution system in the interior, and the structure's sheer beauty. As historian Lowell Soike explains, Longerbeam "eliminated the usual heavy timber posts [and instead constructed] hand-laminated forty-foot-long beams from 1 x 6 inch strips (18 per beam) that he soaked, curved, and fastened together. The result: a majestic group of [eight] gently curved beams [stretching] . . . to the roof's apex in support of a graceful bell-shaped roof hovering over an immense interior space." The loft held 200 tons of loose hay.



Octagon barn near Downey, Johnson County, 2000



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Octagon barn near Downey, Johnson County, 2000









Canfield's round barn, Dunkerton, Black Hawk County, 2000



The cousins of the octagonal barn were the "true-round" barns and polygonal barns (with 6, 10, 12, or 16 sides), built mostly in the second decade of the 20th century. This true-round barn near Dunkerton is constructed of hollow clay tile, a popular building material early in the century because of the rising cost and scarcity of lumber, the state's many tile manufacturing plants, and promotion of tile by the Iowa State College Agricultural Experiment Station. Concrete was another new building material for barns, displacing limestone foundations and dirt floors.

In true-round barns, the stalls, mangers, and feeding and cleaning alleys were laid out in a circle, often around a silo. This was more convenient for the farmer, since 20th-century barns often housed feeder beef cattle and dairy herds. Round barns resisted heavy winds better than rectangular barns, and their self-supporting roofs created more unobstructed loft space. Such features may have originally appealed to some farmers, but most turned their backs on the innovation. Very few true-round or polygonal barns were built after 1920, because of their complexity and expense, the difficulty of building additions, and the start of the farm depression. Most important, the champions of the experiment had come to recognize that the rectangular barn had definite advantages.



This is a wonderful example of a monitor barn, and it is heartbreaking to see that this particular barn has apparently outlived its usefulness on this particular farm. Yet there remain the impressive features from the barn's past. The raised portion of the roof, the "monitor," admitted light and fresh air; the same feature was used on railway cars and, much earlier, as the "clerestory" on medieval churches. The slide-down hay door in the gable end is topped by a formidable hay peak. The hay track running along the inside of the ridgepole was probably manufactured by the Loudon Company of Fairfield, Iowa. Farmers looked to Loudon for metal equipment for barns, including ventilators, hay tracks and forks, sliding door tracks, and carrier systems for feed and litter.

Although haymows conjure up romantic images for those who never helped "make hay," the reality of working in the mow was far different. By a system of ropes and pulleys, a set of large forks (tine, harpoon, or grapple style) lifted huge wads of hay from a hayrack and hauled that hay up to the metal track at one end of the roof and then into the barn along the track. When the rope was tripped, the wad of hay (or later, the block of bales) dropped on the floor of the haymow. It then was the job of one or two unlucky people who happened to draw the assignment to mow or stack the hay back into the remote corners of the cavity to make room for the next forkful that would soon be dropped in their midst. Clouds of dust and hayseeds filled the haymow on these occasions, rendering breathing a difficult and hazardous operation.

The windmill behind this barn reminds us of another essential farming practice, pumping water, a tedious chore often done by hand by the children in the family. Until rural electrification spread across Iowa, windpower and windmills made watering thirsty livestock on a hot summer day much easier. What an exhilarating invention! The windmill did the work, and the essential water kept on flowing.



Barn near Chelsea, Tama County, 2000







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Barn near Chelsea, Tama County, 2000





Barn near Mount Vernon, Linn County, 1999

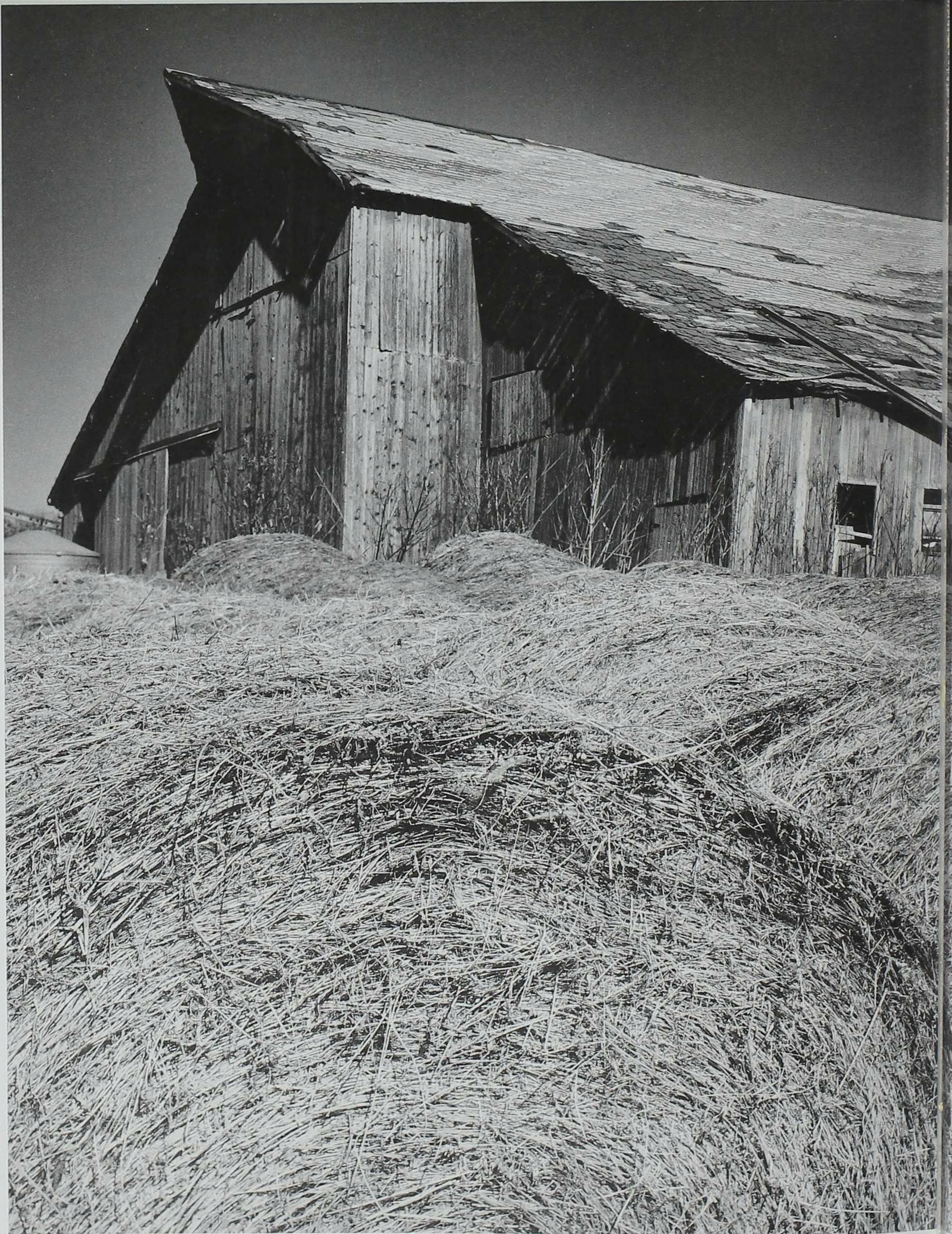
The enormous hay bales outside this barn remind us that each technological change in cutting, drying, and storing hay requires changes in skills, equipment, and structures. Hay was first stored in stacks created in the fields, but exposure to weather brought mold and rot. Bringing the hay into a barn protected it from the elements, but loose hay quickly filled up a haymow.

More hay could be stored in a barn if it was first compressed into bales out in the fields. Bound together by wire or twine, the rectangular bales were of a size that could be lifted by an ordinary farmer, stacked efficiently in a loft, and thrown down to hay mangers and livestock below. But haylofts in earlier barns couldn't always handle the extra weight of bales.

In 1971 came the innovation of large, round bales, by Vermeer Manufacturing of Pella, Iowa. The baler rolls the hay into cylinders roughly five feet in diameter, much larger than traditional barns could accommodate. Wrapping the bales in a protective covering reduced the need for indoor storage away from the elements.

Other technological changes brought more changes in farm structures. As farm equipment increased in size, farmers could no longer fit tractors and other machinery into the traditional barn with its many support posts and low rafters. By the 1970s, single-story metal pole-barns frequently sheltered equipment, livestock, and harvested crops on Iowa farms.









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Limestone barn, near Cedar Falls, Black Hawk County, 2001



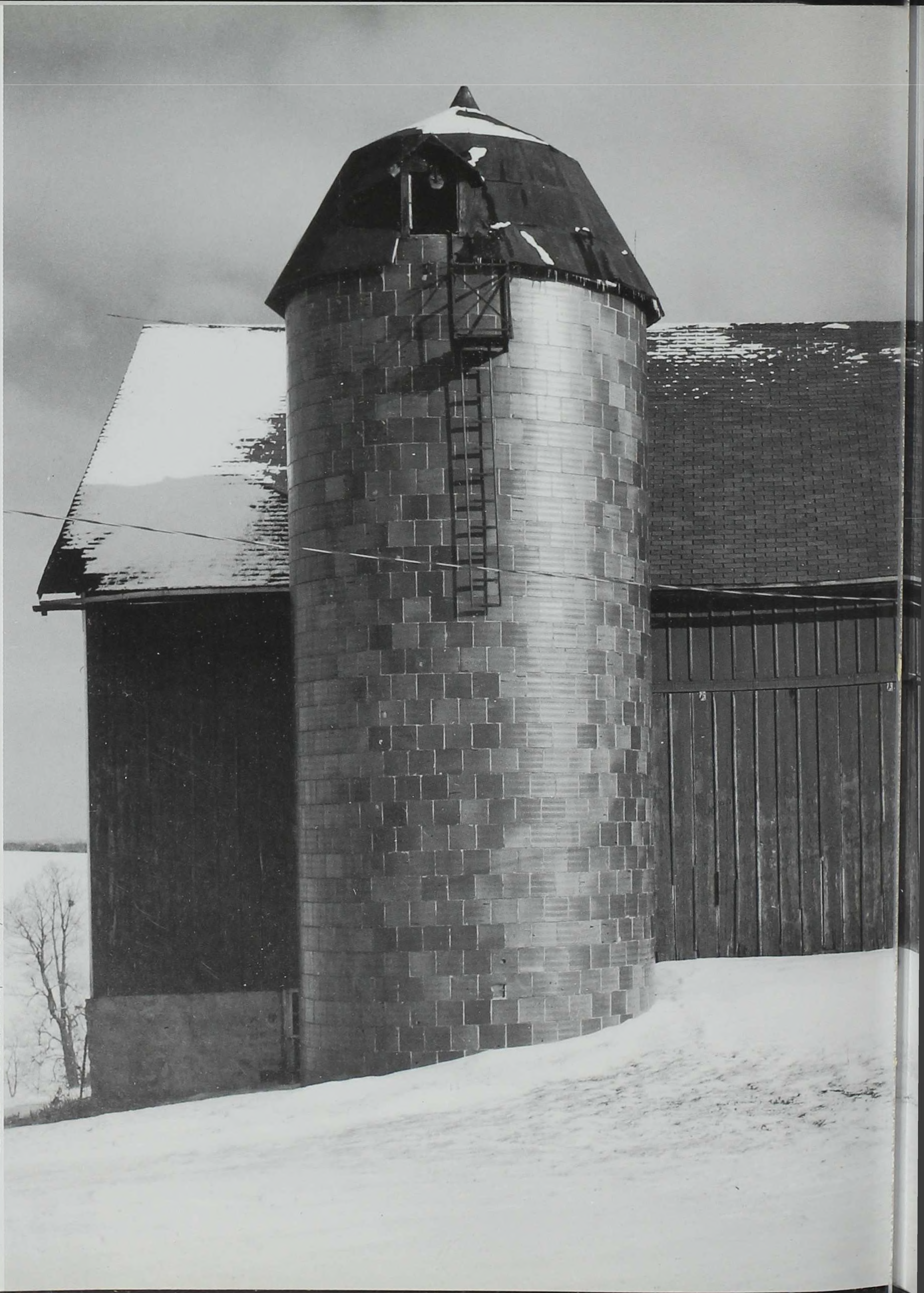
Although this imposing limestone barn with the ornamental roof finials is not a typical Iowa barn, one feature is common: multiple stories. Note the four levels of windows.

In this barn, the entrance on the end opens at ground level, so that the cattle and horses could be brought directly into the section of the barn with stalls, pens, milking stanchions, and hay mangers. The middle level of the barn was accessible through another large door that swung out or slid open (here, barely visible on the facade facing right). This allowed the farmer to drive a wagon directly into the barn for loading and unloading. Hay was stored in the topmost levels. Sometimes barns that are built on two different grades are called "bank barns." Often a ramp constructed of planks or earth leads up to the second level.

On the next page, a bank barn and clay tile silo (photographed in 1999 in Dubuque County) catch the light and shadow of a winter day.



Bank barn with silo, Dubuque County, 1999

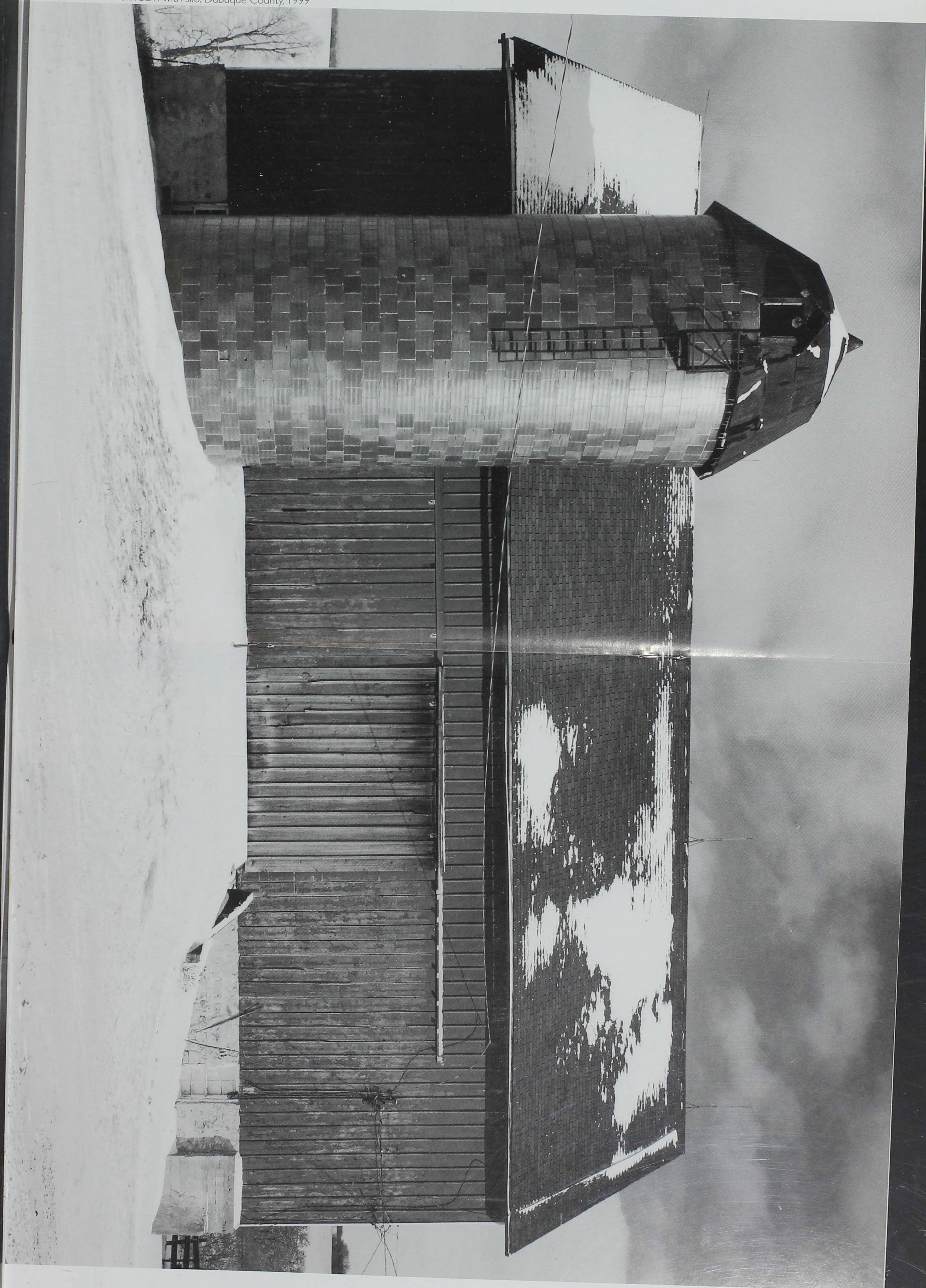








Bank barn with silo, Dubuque County, 1999





To someone who grew up on a farm, the memories generally fall into two categories. Either the thoughts are cocooned in a romantic haze of blue sky, green grass, golden corn, and red barns; or the thoughts veer to the other extreme—hard work, long days, hot summers, cold winters, and insufferably repetitive tasks. Most people remember the past as better than it really was, or worse than it really was. Historians who depend upon oral interviews for evidence of what really happened in the past quickly learn to adjust for these two extremes. Some farm life probably was idyllic, and some hellish. Most farm families experienced both joy and sorrow, excitement and boredom, work and play. We cannot remember everything in our own pasts, and therefore the selectivity of memory filters out many incidents.

This magnificent barn was constructed on a particular farm at a particular time for a particular purpose. Its gambrel roof (popular between 1880 and 1920) allowed more storage than a simple gable roof. Two metal Louden ventilators and several windows brought in fresh air and light. Horizontal clapboards side the barn, rather than the more typical vertical boards and battens. The barn appears abandoned, its roof deteriorated, its rafters exposed.

We see all of these architectural details, and, probably, with equal fairness, we can see this barn either as a symbol of the glory of the family farm, or as a symbol of the harsh, isolated, brutal labor of farm life. Regardless of which, the barn speaks of the past.



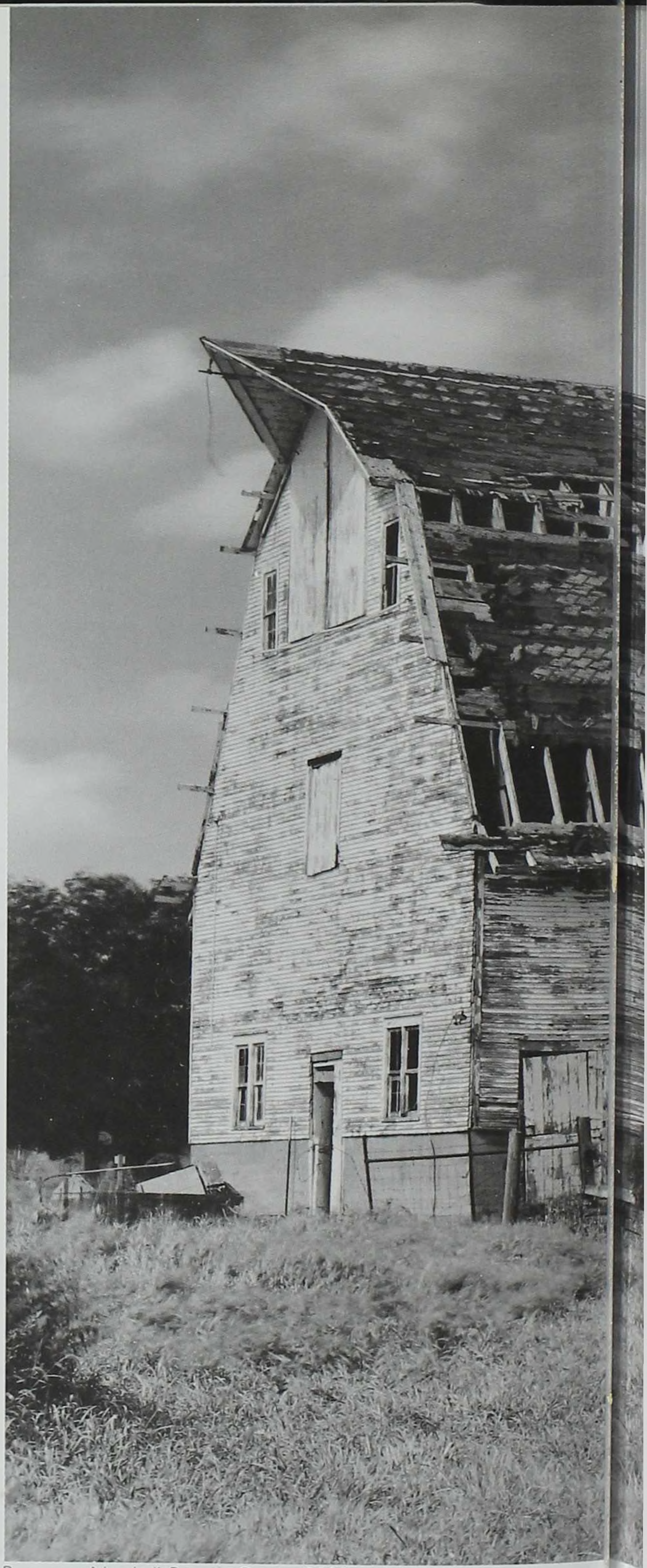
Barn near Newhall, Benton County, 2000



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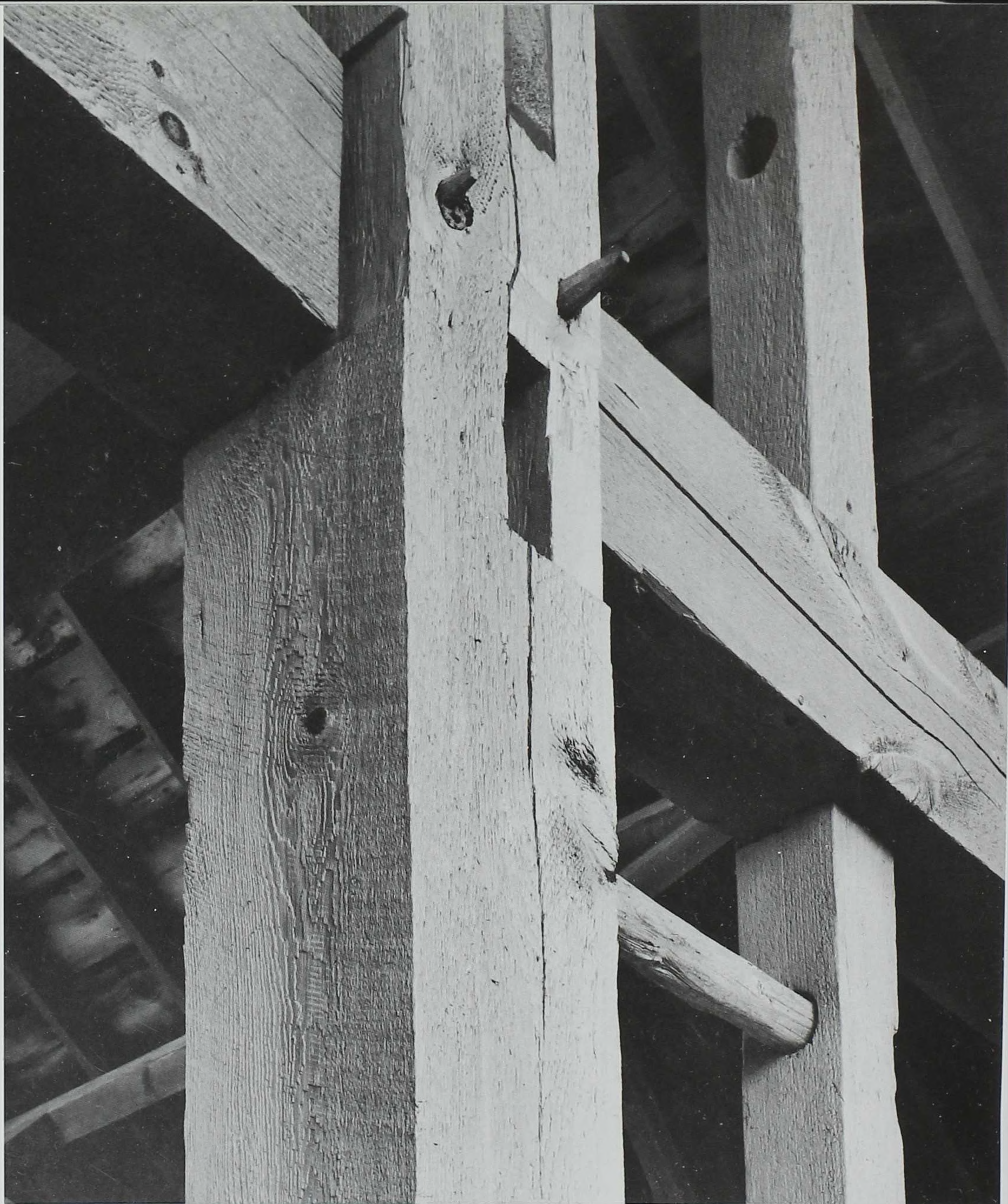


Barn near Newhall, Benton County, 2000









Support beams in barn in Washington County, 2000

Michael P. Harker is a professional photographer from Cedar Rapids and an ophthalmic photographer at University of Iowa Hospitals and Clinics. Many more of his fine photos appear in Harker's *Barns: Visions of an American Icon*, with text by Jim Heynen (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2003). Harker uses Ansel Adams's zone system for exposing and developing his black and white negatives, which he then prints on silver gelatin paper.

Loren N. Horton lives in Iowa City. He continues to research, write, and lecture on Iowa history, after 17 years in teaching and 24 years at the State Historical Society of Iowa.

This presentation was developed from "Barns of Iowa," a touring exhibit commissioned by Humanities Iowa, with photos by Harker and text by Horton. Our thanks to Humanities Iowa for permission to adapt the exhibit material for readers of this magazine.



# From the photographer

In November 1993 I took a photo of a windmill vane mechanism leaning against a barn in rural Clutier, Iowa. This was the beginning of my exploration of barns as artistic material for fine art photography, but it also led to an epiphany. I came to realize, as have many Iowans, that these barns were disappearing and with them a way of life. Iowa is losing a thousand barns a year, to fire, storm, urbanization, neglect, and removal.

The project that evolved became both an artistic endeavor and a recording process—an “artistic documentary.” The urge to record does not preclude the creation of outstanding visual compositions. The “truth” of my photographs is manipulated, like all truth. I photograph from a personal point of view, a physical point of observation, and

a synthesis of reality, interpretation, and nostalgia. My project's main goal is to leave a long-lasting visual record of what I believe is one of the most significant economic engines and ways of life in our state's history—farming—as portrayed by the icon of agrarian culture—the barn.

The simple process of approaching farmers to ask permission to go on their land to get my photographs led to many conversations about their barns. There was both pride in their family histories and a sadness that changes in the economy of family farming and modern methods of agriculture were ringing a death knell for the viability of the barns. Each barn reflects the plight of the individual farm operation, and I believe that my images act as a barometer of these conditions.

—Michael P. Harker

## Further reading on Iowa's barns

- *Harker's Barns: Visions of an American Icon*, photographs by Michael P. Harker; text by Jim Heynen (University of Iowa Press, 2003).
- *Without Right Angles: The Round Barns of Iowa*, by Lowell J. Soike (State Historical Department, 1983; 2nd ed. Penfield Press, 1991).
- *Barns of the Midwest*, ed. Allen G. Noble and Hubert G. H. Wilhelm (Ohio University Press, 1995).
- “Viewing Iowa's Farmsteads,” chapter by Lowell J. Soike, in *Take This Exit: Rediscovering the Iowa Landscape*, ed. Robert F. Sayre (Iowa State University Press, 1989).
- For these and other books, artwork, and posters of Iowa barns, shop at the Museum Store at the State Historical Building Iowa, 600 E. Locust, Des Moines, IA 50319 (515-283-1757). Shop online at [www.iowahistory.org](http://www.iowahistory.org). Click on “Museum Store.”

## Barn preservation and advocacy

- The Iowa Barn Foundation ([www.iowabarnfoundation.org](http://www.iowabarnfoundation.org)) educates the public, provides barn restoration matching grants, sponsors an all-state barn tour of restored barns, and publishes a semi-annual magazine for members. Contact: Iowa Barn Foundation, c/o Roxanne Mehlich, 17590 730th Avenue, Zearing, IA 50278, phone 641-487-7690.
- Iowa has 220 barns on the National Register of Historic Places. Yours may be eligible if it fits any of these criteria: • My barn is very old (built before 1870 in Iowa), or very large (more than 40 x 60 feet). • My barn is built with all-stone walls that extend from the foundation to the roof. • My barn is of unusual shape (not rectangular or L-shaped, but square, octagon, round, or U-shaped). • My barn was publicized as a model for new barn equipment, prefabrication, or innovative construction techniques. • My barn was where an important event happened (such as a farm protest meeting, or the founding of a farm organization), where a noted or eminent agriculturist worked while gaining fame, or where the first of a new breed of cattle or other livestock was introduced in this region or state. • My barn was built in accord with blueprint plans that I still possess (for example, Loudon Machinery Co. designs). • My barn is an early known example in my vicinity of curved rafter roof design. • My barn has an unusual series of interior plank trusses supporting the roof (perhaps a Clyde or “Iowa” truss, or a Shawver truss), or an unusual design (architectural form, decoration, or embellishments). • For more information, contact Beth Foster Hill, National Register Coordinator, State Historical Society of Iowa, 600 E. Locust, Des Moines, IA 50319, phone 515-281-4137, e-mail at [Beth.Foster@iowa.gov](mailto:Beth.Foster@iowa.gov)

## Barn photography featured at Iowa State Fair in 2004

- The State Fair Photography Salon will salute the barns of Iowa in a special theme category. This is a juried competition. For rules and entry forms, write: Charley Starnes, Photography Salon Supt., Iowa State Fair, Statehouse, 400 E. 14th St., Des Moines, IA 50319-0198.



LABONTE CREEK BY WILLIAM HENRY JACKSON (SCOTTS BLUFF NATIONAL MONUMENT)




# *Home to Iowa*

Letters from the western trails

*Text and transcriptions by Kathryn Webb Wikert*





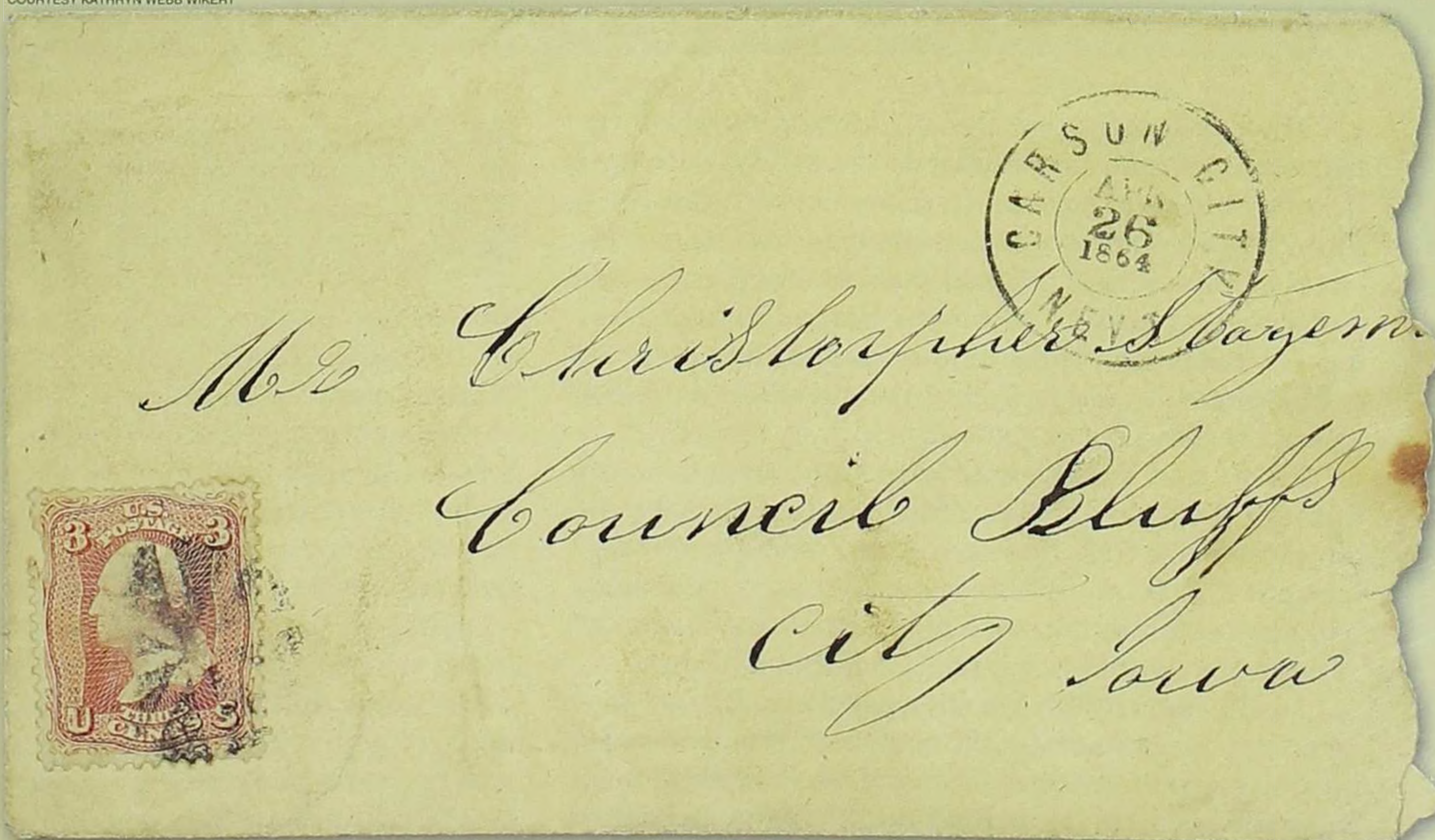
THE WEST exerted a mighty pull on Iowans in the mid-19th century, attracting them with tales of adventure and promises of new beginnings, enticing them from their homes.

Home to siblings Sarah, John, and James Stageman, from their various points on the western trails, was a distant log cabin in Pottawattamie County, Iowa. There lived Christopher and Mary Stageman, their parents, the center of their affections and the recipients of their heartfelt letters for one long decade.

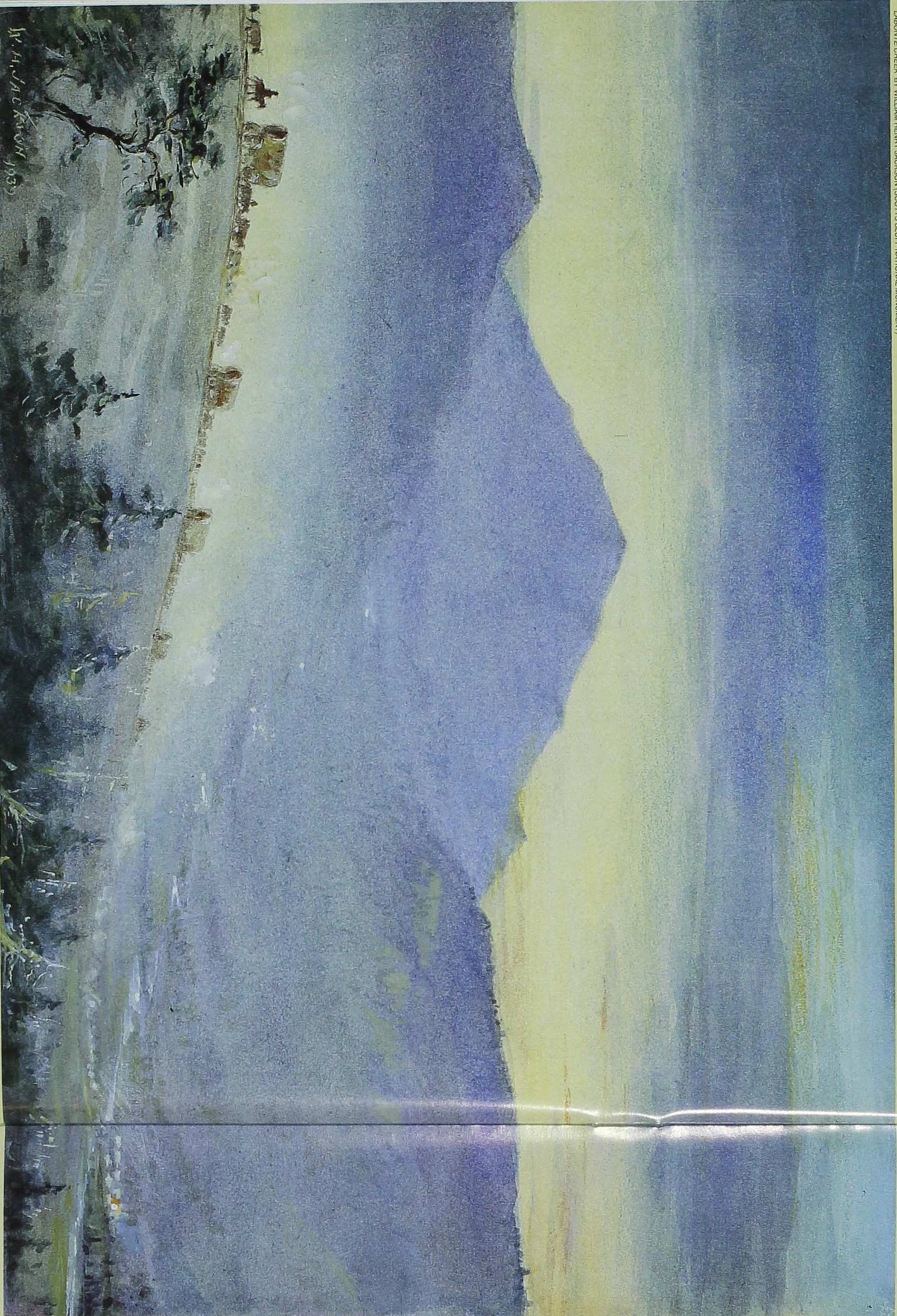
Home had not always been this cabin along Mosquito Creek; the Stagemans, like so many Americans on the move in the 19th century, were not yet rooted to one place. Christopher and Mary and their five children—Sarah, Harriet, John, James, and Mary Ann—arrived in America in 1840 from England, where Christopher had worked in livery and as a farrier on an estate near Carlisle. For eleven years the family farmed in the close-knit community of Fair Hill, Maryland.

In 1851, the Stageman family joined the westward movement of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, though only the eldest child, 23-year-old Sarah, had been baptized Mormon. Perhaps Christopher intended to build a mill in the new Mormon territory; a decade earlier he had brought with him from England the detailed diagrams of a gristmill. Sons John, now 20, and James, 17, were no doubt feeling the pull of the West, and perhaps daughters Mary Ann and Harriet were as well.

COURTESY KATHRYN WEBB WIKERT







W. H. JACKSON 1903

# Home to Iowa

## Letters from the western trails

Text and transcriptions by Kathryn Webb Wicket

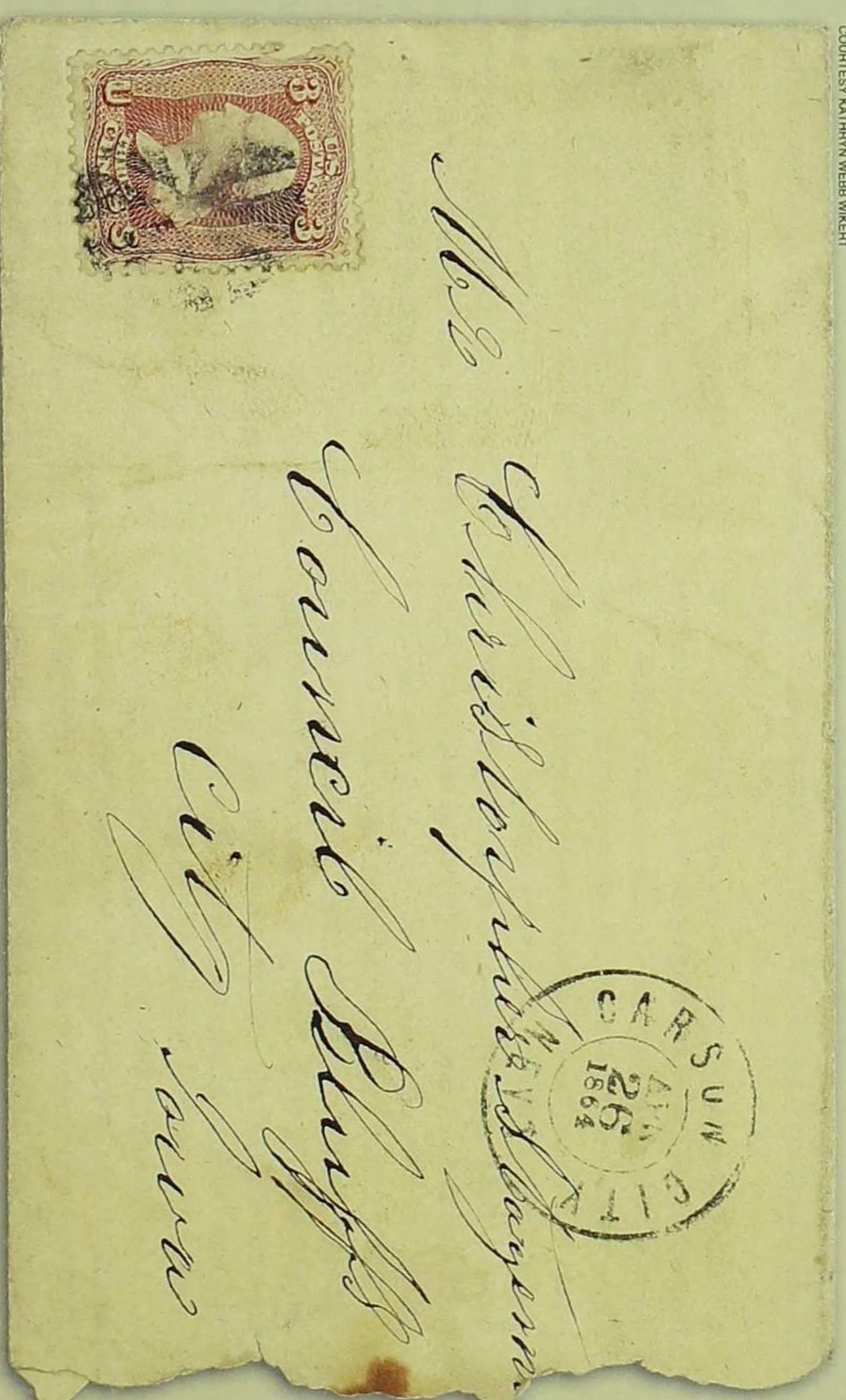
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COURTESY/KATHRYN WEBB WICKET







Traveling with a group of Mormon families, the Stagemans came by steamboat up the Missouri River to Wray's Landing at Kanesville, the center of the Mormon settlements along the western edge of Iowa. Kanesville (soon to be renamed Council Bluffs) served as the last major staging area for Mormons headed to their Zion, the Great Salt Lake Valley, and as an outfitting point for gold rushers headed to California and other emigrants headed to Oregon.

These vast movements of people were pouring through Kanesville, buying food and supplies for the long westward trek. By June of 1851, some 4,500 wagons and 22,000 head of horses, mules, oxen, and cows had passed through town already that year. This level of migration would continue for another two years.

Disillusioned with Mormon practices, Christopher and Mary Stageman chose to remain in Iowa, purchasing 160 acres three miles east of Kanesville. The Iowa soil promised abundant crops, and the Missouri valley

**Kanesville (later renamed Council Bluffs) attracted Mormons, gold rushers, and other westward travelers buying provisions and crossing the wide Missouri River in the late 1840s and early 1850s.**

was rich in wildlife. The seven Stagemans settled in.

Within the year, 22-year-old Harriet married Francis Stine and moved to Pleasant Valley, a Mormon settlement just south of Kanesville. By the next summer, Sarah had joined one of the last wagon trains for the Salt Lake Valley. Sarah's commitment to the Mormon faith had not faltered, and by going on ahead, she hoped to lead the way for the rest of her family.

Having Sarah leave Iowa, knowing they might never see her again, must have been heartbreaking for Christopher and Mary, especially in light of their disenchantment with Mormon practices and their realization of the rugged journey facing their daughter.

Heartbreak again washed over them in the fall of



1852. While Christopher was back east settling the sale of his Maryland farm, daughter Harriet died unexpectedly. "The shock that I felt I cannot describe," he wrote to wife Mary, "and what I felt at the time I cannot explain. — The very story the people in Philadelphia kept from me, I was told [in Fair Hill]. — They meant to have broken it out to me by degrees, when I returned, and then I should have been prepared."

Christopher and Mary Stageman were not done saying goodbye to their children. In the fall of 1853, John headed west. He would make good, he surely told his parents. He would visit Sarah. He would write home.

Thus began another great migratory movement—this time, of letters, tucked into envelopes and sent back east to the Stageman home on Mosquito Creek. Over the next several years, Christopher and Mary would receive numerous letters from their children out west, carefully unfolding the thin pages, studying them in the dim light of winter or the glare of summer, then refolding them, putting them in a safe place.

The habit continued for a century and a half. Five generations of Stagemans preserved the treasured letters in a weathered wooden box. The letters bring to light the affections and obligations of family, the push and pull of human relationships, the struggles between a child's definition of success and a parent's of duty.

The forces that pulled the Stagemans over the Missouri and into the West worked on multitudes of Americans. Those who went west often sent letters to those they left behind, but not all of them were as emotionally honest as those written by the Stageman children to their parents in western Iowa.

**W**hen John Stageman writes to his parents in March 1854, he is visiting his sister Sarah, but he does not reveal in the letter that she has become the third wife in a polygamous marriage. Instead, other news fills the letter—his plans to head farther west, the high costs of food, and, for his younger brother, James, descriptions of an Indian raid (the Native Americans in Utah Territory were suffering from the encroachment of the Mormons onto their traditional hunting and food-gathering areas). John also suggests his parents talk with local storekeeper and former Council Bluffs mayor Cornelius Voorhis regarding their new son-in-law, Charles Bassett.

*[Great Salt Lake Valley] March the 14 1854*

My dear parents

It is with pleasure that I take up my pen to inform you that I received your letter and I was rejoiced to

here from you . . . Sarah received one from you and one from Maryan when I received this I thought you had forgot me but I think different now for you sent me a good letter I had got very home sick to here from you . . . I am in the valley of the grate salt lake and I have been in this valley over seven months and have not made one cent. I wold come back this spring if I could for I know that I could do best their but I expect to leave this valley on the 20 day of april for California trusting in god for protection praying that god will keep me from all harm I wold have gone before but Sarah was not married and I did not like to leave her but now she is married to charls basset and she [h]as got a good home and she is well satisfied. He is well of[f] and he is a nice man If you want to know about him ask vories in Kanessville.

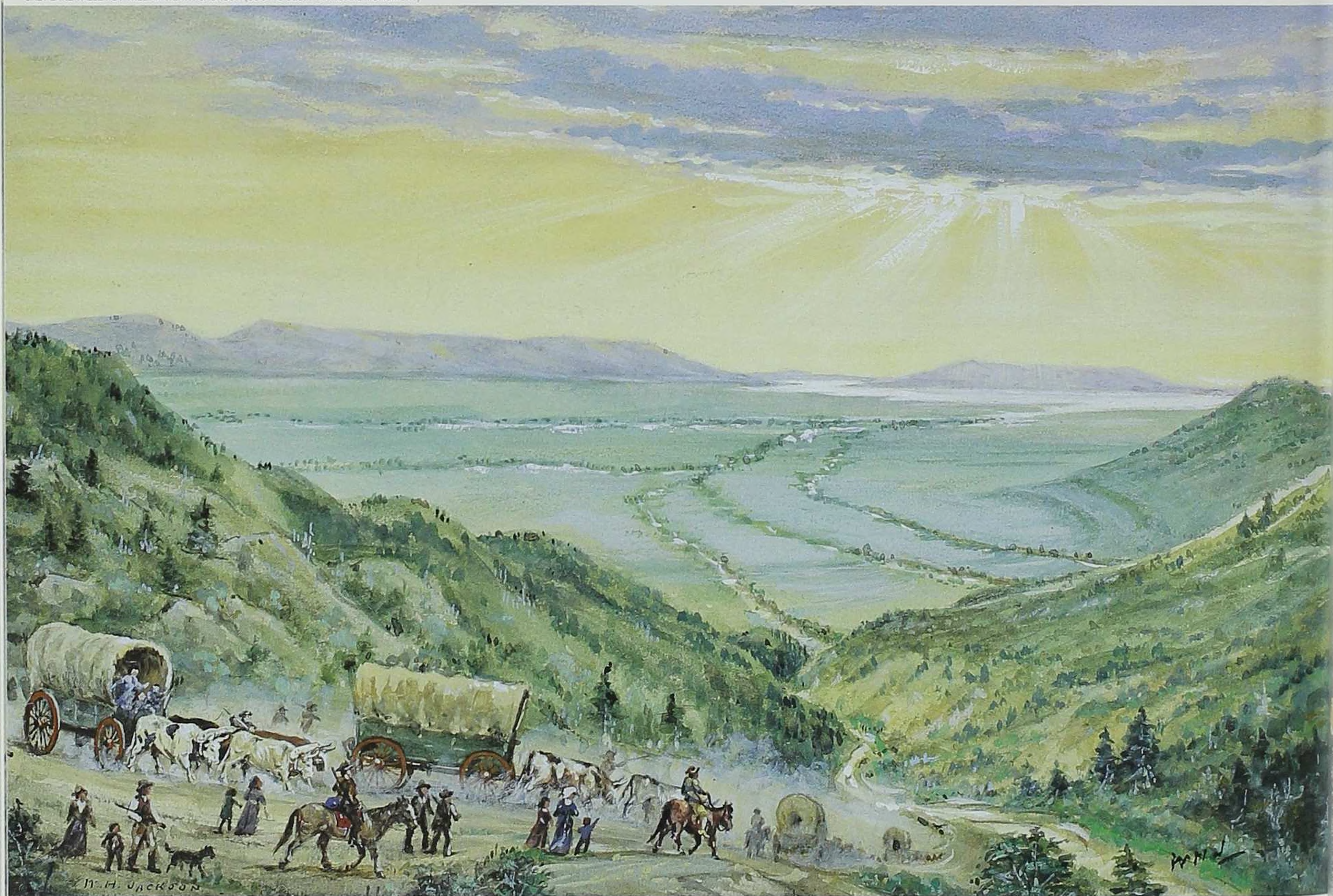
I shal not stay over a year if I can get away and I would like it first rate if father would buy me a little place cloce by his. I think I shall be able to pay for it again I come back.

James I must now tell you something about my silf I live about 20 miles from the city I have spent a grate deal of money in this valley every thing is dear since but a man as to work for 1 dollar per day flour is 6 dollars per hudred wheat is 2 dollars a bushell potatos is 1 dollar per bushell coffee is 40 cents a pound sugar the same tobacco one dollar a plug leather is 75 a pound for a pair of shose that you could buy for 80 cents we have to pay 4 dollars but if a man as a start and go to farming he can do very well for he can rase from 40 to 50 bushels of weat per acre and every thing els acodingly but he [h]as to pay . . . [a] tenth of all he possess and all he rases

. . . James you told [me] to tell you something about the Indians. There [They] are very bad about to weaks a go they Stole a bout 1 hudred and fifty head of cattle and about 40 men put after them an[d] they will slay them all and that will rase [h]ell among the indeans the mormens are all forted up it will keep them all the time gading [guarding] the indeans if I was to stay in the valley thed [they'd] send me off to preach to the nations of the earth they would give me any thing if I would stay but I have other things to find

James I send a few lines to lisebel garner tell her that I was glad to here from [her] I got the bracelet she sent to me and I was glad of it. I intend to keep it to remember her by and tell her that I will not get married till I come back and if she is not married it will be her and me for it there is plenty of girls in this valley and they would be glad to marry me but they cannot comit James I have pade to dear for my w[h]irl I would give every hair on my head if I could





see father and mother and James and maryann and frank and lenard but it [is] all to no use but I must do the best I can . . . james all I have to say to you and every young man if you know when you ar well off[f] stay where you are . . . I bid you good by for I am going [on] a long jorney you need not answer this letter

Here I go good by good by  
my heart is ful I have to cry

John Stageman

April the 18 1854

G S L [Great Salt Lake]

My dear parents I take my pen at this time to inform you that Sarah received a letter from James and Sarah red it to me and I was glad to [h]eare from you . . .

I thought as my brother in law [Charles Bassett] was going to cainesville I would send a few lines to you to tell you that I start for california monday next and you need not answer this letter James you said

**The Great Salt Lake Valley became Sarah Stageman Bassett's new home, but the Mormom refuge was only a stopover for her brother John in 1854.**

you was going to sea but you take a brothers advice and stay at home for traveling is not wat it is cut up to be If I was home again I would never leave for it is a dogs life to live . . .

John Stageman

**N**ow Sarah writes her parents, trying to explain her feelings, still hoping they will come west. Her longing will be a frequent theme.

Great Salt Lake City Sunday May 7th 54

My dear Mother

I sit down this day to write a few lines to you it gives me the greatest of pleasure I can assure you



Ah! But a far greater pleasure were you only here that I could converse to you the same. Oh! My dear Mother never before since I left you have I shed tears to see you until now. Last fall when John came in I was quite unwell & could have given anything to have seen you & many times besides . . . I can truly realize there is no care like a mother's. No my dear Mother I was aware of that before I left home I counted the loss most assurdly — but I was truly convinced this was the work of the Most High God — & truly it is — & you were disposed not to believe it — & I thought I must be up & a doing — opening the way for you — though thorney be my path . . .

. . . O if I could only think for one moment you were coming this fall to spend the winter happy should I be. I could wait patiently for you, until then. Ah! I know too well it is not the case — I am writing thus to you — but perhaps you have turned your back upon me on account of my situation . . .

If my husband was at home I should not feel as I do — but I should have that same desire to see you But he is not here — & you are not here . . . I know it is all Mormonism — & the greater the trial the greater the crown.

. . . John has gone to California . . . When you send any more letters pray for them to whom you send — & they will be sure to come safe . . . I hope you have seen Mr Bassett before this time. I trust you will continue to write to me — will you?

The spring is rather backward here we have had quite a severe winter. We have had quite a covering of snow this morning — it is quite cold at present. The gardens though look quite nice. I was at a ball in april when we had asparagus, lettuce, radishes, green cucumbers etc etc.

I pray my Heavenly Father & My God to bless you continually & direct & control all your doings by his unseen hand at all times, for your best good.

. . . I would send my likeness now but I am so thin you would be astonished — thinner than when Charles left.

Sarah Bassett

Father what a pleasure you would afford me would you write me a few lines if they were but a few

**H**aving arrived in California, John writes from Gold Springs and Columbia, in the southern mining region. Vast amounts of gold had been discovered there the previous year—though John still wonders if he could make more as a plasterer. Mail from California to Iowa now takes about five weeks; John will write often.

*Gold Spring [California] Aug 2nd 1854*

Dear Father

. . . I arrived here the 10th day of July had a hard time crossing the plains I am mining doing midling well & enjoy good health I would wrote sooner but had not an opportunity as I was so buisy in getting things arranged for mining Tell James not to come to California Tell him if he wants to lead a dogs life to come but if he knows wen he is well off to remain where he is as it is a mighty hard country. I expect if nothing happens to be at home in 12 or 15 months as there is no chance for any one except mining & the country is dug over [so] that it is very hard to make much You must excuse the short letter as the Mail is about closing I will write more soon Write as soon as you get this

Yours Affectionately  
John Stageman . . .

*Columbia [California] November 24th 1854*

Dear parents

I feel thankfull that I enjoy this opportunity of embracing you with these few lines. I have not herd from you since I have been in California and I would like to here from you dear parents I have enjoyed good health. I have got a good claim at present and am a doing verry well but I think I will leave California before long weather I make any thing or not if god spairs my life for it is the wickedest place I ever saw and I tell you that a man can make more in the States than he can here for the digings is not so good as they are cract up to be I have not herd from Sarah since I left her. I cannot get a answer from her and you must send me word about her but I advise you all never to go to salt lake for yo[u] will not like the ways of the people . . .

please excuse this spelling and writing for I have wordd very hard . . .

John Stageman . . .

*[Columbia, California] Febuary th 3 1855*

My Dear Brother [James]

. . . I was glad to here from you but I was sorry to here that my dear mother was sick . . . James I am out of a claim at this present time you wanted to know wether I was saving any money or not. James it is [h]ard work for any man to save money at this presant time for the digins is about run out i ham not saving much i could save a little if i would work at my trade but i did not com to california to work at it. i cam to mine to make my pile or nothing but it is a slim chance at present.





[Published at the WIDE WEST OFFICE, 181 Clay Street, San Francisco.]

## RIVER MINING.

February the 3<sup>rd</sup> 1855  
My Dear Brother

I received your letter January the 20<sup>th</sup> 1855 and I was glad to hear from you but I was sorry to hear that my dear mother was sick I pray to God that mother may be restored to good health a gain. I hope that these few lines may find you as they leave me that is in good health. James I am out of a claim at this present time you wanted to know whether I was saving any money or not. James it is no work for any man to save money at this present time for the veins is about run out I have not saving much I could save a little if I would work at my trade but I did not come to California to work at it. I came to mine to make my pile or nothing but it is

John enclosed in this letter two "small speciments of gold wick I dug up with my one hands one for you and the other for mary ann" and then added: "the large peace for James." To his mother and father he promised a present when he came home.



I feel glad to here that you are getting a long so fast with your farming James i want you to send me how times is in iowa and if I was to com home wether I could get work at my trade or not californnia is a hard place Their is more shooting and robbing and hanging than any other place i ever saw . . .

James you wanted to know wether there is any pretty gals here or not i will till that there is not their is plenty pretty wimen in this contry from all contrys but they are bad ones . . .

I send my cind [kind] respects to you all praying that the god of heaven may bless and prosper you all is the prayer of your obedient son and brother

John Stageman . . .

*Great Salt Lake City March 55*

My dear brother [James]

. . . I was very glad to hear that you were all well & doing well. You say something about a blue eyed daughter. You never told me whose it was, but I judged it must be Mary Anns by the name I was truly glad to learn she was doing well. I hope it does not give her the trouble mine does for my boy has cried day & night ever since it was born, for more than four months now, that I am almost worn out & I am trying to teach school, & have been ever since my babe was three weeks old.

My husband has gone on a mission & I have got to do something if it is but a little, faith & hope sustains me, it is all Mormonism. You say John wonders why I have not written to him, but I say he need not It is only two months ago since he wrote to me for the first time, & I answered his letter the same or the next day I got his. I wondered whether he was dead or alive, & so you may tell John that I was the one to think it strange. I hope you will excuse my short letter I am improving the time while my boy is taking a nap. You wonder what makes him cry, it is the cholic he is well otherwize . . . Write offten it does me good to hear from you

This is from your  
Affectionate Sister  
Sarah S. Bassett

*California June the 22 1855*

My dear brother [James]

. . . you talk of going a way but James I would advise you to stay at home for there is nothing to be made in travling I know i have not made any thing since i left home James you want me to come home but i cannot at present for i have bad luck i suppose you herd of adams and cos bank bre[a]king I lost a

good many dollars in their bank I put it in their for safe keeping and i lost it James I have seen a grate many city a[nd] town since I left home. If God spare my life till I com home I can tell you some grate yarns about my travling James I have lost about 15 hundred dollar in adams and the river together and I must redeem it a gain if I can before I come home . . .

John Stageman

*Great Salt Lake City July 30th 1855*

My dear parents, James & Mary Ann

I sit down to write you, a line or two. Excuse me for not writing the two last mails. I have been so very unwell this summer, & my babe sometimes is very fretful, & I have to teach school to get along & so you may judge the opportunity I have to write, but I suppose if I did not write to you you would never to me. But did you only know how much good it does me to hear from you all you would write every mail. I received a letter from James two mails ago & it was very welcome. I was glad to hear you were all well & doing well. But how happy should I feel to have you all here. Oh! Come now when you can, the time is very fast approaching when you will want to come & cannot. This is the only place of savety. This is a very dry summer. I do not believe that we have had any rain since the first of April. Pleas tell me when Mary Ann's babe was born, tell her to write & James also. I am expecting charles home every day now & I shall be glad when he comes, truly so . . . My dear little [son] is just beginning to grow, he has always been very puny & sickly. Oh how he would love to see you, will he ever come, come, do come & see him. It will be worth your trip. He is a very great comfort to me . . .

Sarah S. Bassett

*[Columbia, California] February the 12 1856*

My dear brother [James]

. . . last July I went to Snake gulch to mine that is a cros the river me and four more found som good digins and we campt under a tree I worked nearly 2 month and I took sick and was not able to work and I went to Columbia and their I stayed that a docktor to see me every day and that run away with my money for they will not look at a man for les than five dollars I had no loveing mother to bring me a cup of tea nor no brother and sister to talk with but [was] all a lone I was sick nere 5 months and then my money run out and then my friends was whole gone and I was obliged to go to the hosespittle and their I am at this present tim[e]. i am very well tended to and thank god I am getting better and I hope with the blessings



of god will be able to go to work in too or three weeks

James I have give up all hope of making a pile I have made up my mind if I get well agane to save money a nuff to come to the States for it is no use of me to try to save money. I can make money anewhere but can not save it something turns up that it must go.

James, California is a poor place for a man in good helth let alone sick there is thousands that is worken for their board . . .

John Stageman

**T**o soothe his restlessness, James, the second youngest Stageman, travels by steamboat and rail to the family's old home back east. From there, he writes of visiting old friends and justifies the trip's costs. In his wanderlust, he even mentions going to Italy.

*Fair hill [Maryland] April 30th 56*

My Dear parents

. . . I do not grudge a cent I have spent in this trip I say to every young man go out & se the world & then you will [know] somthing about it you may stay to home till the day of judgment & not [know] any thing at last . . . [Stayed] in our old home & it brings back to my memory the days of my childhood . . .

James Stageman . . .

*Fair hill [Maryland] may 4th 1856*

My Dear Sister [Mary Ann]

. . . [I am] among the kindest of frends . . . I make my home at mr phillips I expect to go to work to morow if I am well for him if nothing hapens i shall work til I get a leter from home then I think I shal go to itley to se the wondrs their mary ann be not trubled about me for the same god that portect you can pertect the lone wandres on the sea I am poor but I trust not for saken by him who luls the universe the intructions of my dear parents are not lost on me & I will try to prove myself worthy . . . remember [me] kindly to all my aquaintence tel them I have to rome if I could be placed at home just as I was before I left & five hundred dolers to boot I would not exchange for what I have lerned I say to all go out & se the world & lern somthing I am not home sick but I would like to se you all again once more of corse that is natral . . .

James Stageman

*Great Salt Lake June 29th 56*

My dear parents,

I embrace the present opportunity of writing a few lines to you, to inform you I am still among the

living, & my dear boy also, & he is well. I am far from being so. I should have written to you last mail, but I was just moving to a new residence I am living alone with my boy. This is a world of ups and downs please excuse my writing much. My ink is so miserable I cannot write with it . . . I hope [Mary Ann] is better. Please send me word the day of the month she was married, & when her first child was born & when this one I presume from what James says she has got another by this time, & is beating me It is a year ago last Christmas since I heard from John . . .

May the Lord bless you all

From your affectionate daughter

Sarah S. Bassett

*Columbia [California] July the 1 1856*

My dear father

My dear father I feel thankful that I enjoy this opportunity of embracing you with a few lines to let you know that I am in the land of the living and in pretty good helth thank god . . . you say you would like me to come home but I cannot possibly before next spring . . . i should have come home when I herd that james had left you if it had not been for that spell of sickness . . . James talked of coming to California but I told him to stay where he is or else go home, for times is very hard here there is thousands working hard for their grub

we have had a very dry winter and water is very scarce and every thing has been very high but they are not so high now as they have ben . . . please father rite soon and let me know how you all are . . . please send me all the news you can . . .

John Stageman

*Fair Hill [Maryland] Aug 9th 1856*

My Dear parents . . . I am sory to think I have ca[u]sed you so much wory but if you will keep up your curige a few weaks I shall soon be home if god spairs my life and then I shall not lieve you til death parts us & I hope I shall be improved by my journy anuf to repay you for your sorow I loved [you] at first but I love you fore times as much now father I have lerned more in this trip than I could in 7 years at home I was in hope you could get along with out me . . .

James Stageman

*Fair Hill [Maryland] Aug 27th 1856*

Dear Brother [in-law Leonard]

. . . [This is] wat I am going to do I will tel you but I dont want you to talk it over So that every body gets to heir it I was thinking of [buying] a french [cavalry] stalion the pretyest horse you ever saw & if



# HUTCHINGS' PANORAMIC SCENES. — CROSSING THE PLAINS.



EMIGRANT TRAIN PASSING WIND RIVER MOUNTAINS



SIoux INDIANS



INDIANS CHASING BUFFALOES, SCOTT'S BLUFFS



STUCK FAST



COURT-HOUSE ROCK



FIRST NIGHT ON THE PLAINS



MOUTH OF ASH HOLLOW



CHIMNEY ROCK



DEVIL'S GATE



LARAMIE PEAK



SCENE ON THE DESERT



CASTLE ROCK



DRIVING STOCK ACROSS THE PLAINS

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[Views drawn from Nature in 1853. by George H. Baker.]

(SUN PRINT)

Though John writes candidly of his failures on the goldfields and discourages James from leaving the safety of home, his letter to his younger brother on June 22, 1855, is on writing paper bearing illustrations of western scenery, travel, and adventure.



I can buy im will fetch him out & [stable] him for [mares]  
this next spring . . .

James Stageman

*Fair Hill [Maryland] Aug 29th 1856*

My Dear parents

. . . you must not expect any more leters from me  
from this place for I have the poorest luck at geting  
answers over here in my life . . . you must excuse this  
for I have rote so much letters that I am tired . . .

James Stageman

*Iowa October 6 1856*

My Dear Son [James]

It is with pleasue I write to you I am glad you are  
all well as it leaves us the same I have sent you the en-  
closed which I hope you will recive to bring you home to  
us again, I have put it under the Care of Mr Phillips . . .

I Remain Your Affectionate

Mother & Father

Christopher Stageman

**T**he \$50 from James's father reaches Maryland on November 4, but James had already left for Iowa a month earlier. After seven months in the East, he is again farming the home place with his parents. In 1856/57, Council Bluffs experiences the most severe winter yet recorded, followed in the next fall by economic panic and depression. Council Bluffs suffers along with the rest of the country, with banks collapsing.

Meanwhile, in California, fire has leveled Columbia. John has just recovered from jaundice, perhaps from hepatitis, and bilious fever, which affected his digestive tract. Now 28, John is feeling his years.

*[Columbia, California] February the 14 1858*

My dear brother [James]

. . . I told you that i was going to work for the new water company but i could not stand it so I did not work long. we have had a grate fire in Columbia since I rote to you it burned the city all down slick and clean it burned dogs rosted hogs and burned 9 men and scorched several others So i went to work at my trade and made some money and then i went off a prospecten and I took the yellow jander and i let them run on me for some time and the boys told me if i did not do something for them they would kill me so i went to town and doctored for them and got well and . . . worked 5 days and then i took the bilious fever and it was very bad I lay for 4 weeks and I got well agane and I feel first rate

i [am] working in a [quartz] mill at present i am getting small pay but it is more than a grate many is getting wages is very low and every thing else is very high so it is bad for the laborer i get 50 dollars pr month the quarts mill is a mill to grind rock . . . it is called the mother of gold because there is more or less in the rock for hundred of feet deep.

James you say if i do not come home next spring you will come out here but take my advice . . . californa is a bad place. i will come as soon as i can. i think you ought to get married and settle for life for i never expect to get married for i am getting old and loosening my teeth . . . give my cind love to all inquirey friends . . .

John Stageman

*Columbia [California] July th 1 1858*

My dear brother [James]

It is with pleasure that [I] embrace this opertunity of answering your letter . . . i was very sorry to here that mother was lame and not abel to walk without crutches James I thought your letter was verry cool you said I did not tell you to answer the other letter that I rote to you. I had forgot it but I will not forget this. Please answer this letter and send me all the news that you can. I was verry glad to receive them papers wich you sent me. The last time I rote to you I was in the [quartz] mill but I left it I am mining for my self . . . James California is nerely deserted and I think I will desert it to I have a strong notion to travel about 15 hundred miles up north for me to come home is imposible I have not much money and to come home without money I will not do it for I have bean out here most 5 years and spent my best days and I must make a rase before I come home if god will

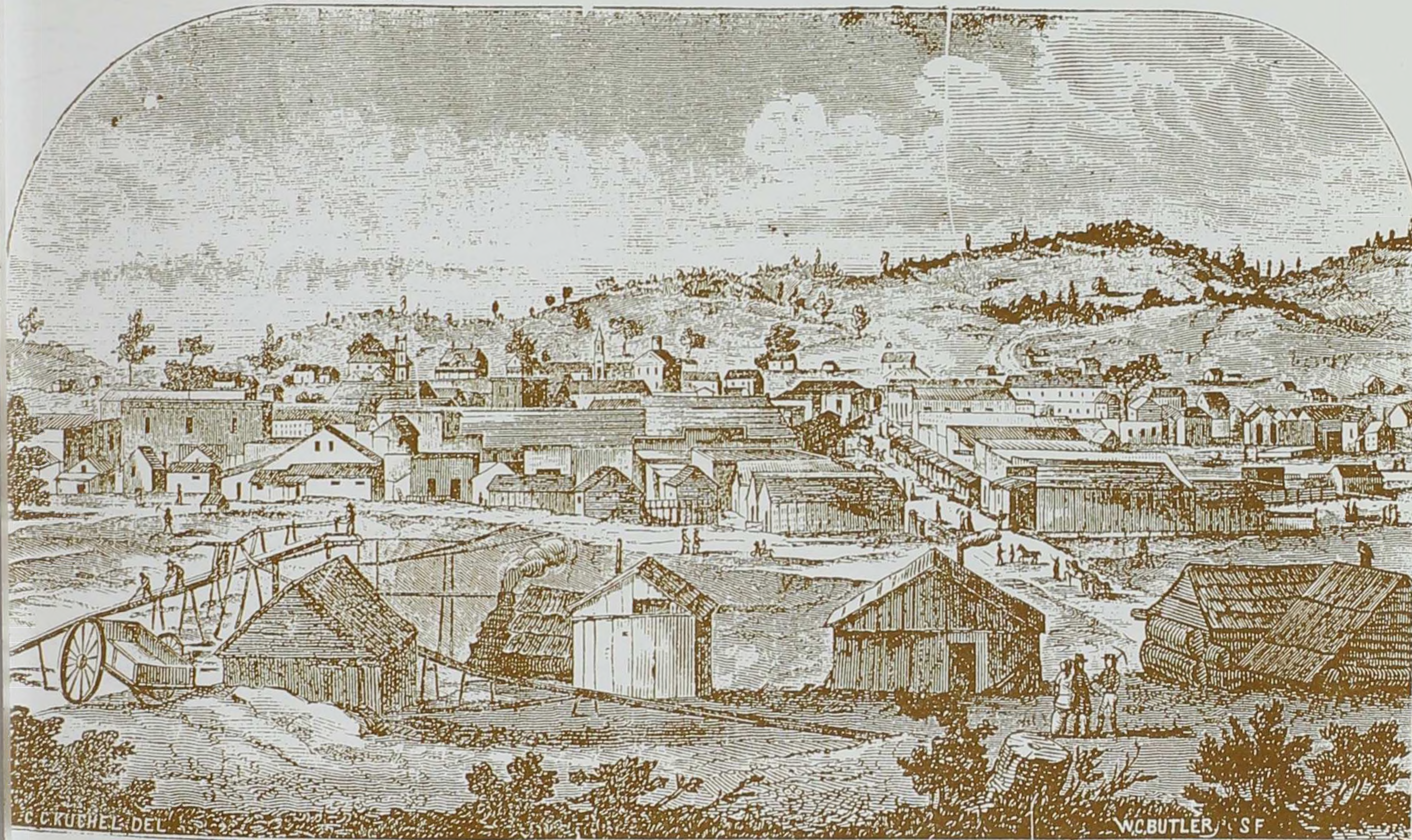
. . . [If] I had known 5 years ago what I know now I would not have come to California . . .

John Stageman

**F**our years after his brother's departure for Utah and California, James finally achieves his dream of going west—though not very far west. Driving his small herd of cattle, he joins his friend, Chester Risley, on his ranch in Cedar County in the northeast corner of Nebraska Territory. Earlier in a letter to James, Risley had boasted of fast-growing corn, fine-looking beans, and potatoes "as Large as my Fist." Risley also instructed James to bring "carpenter tools to fix the dore and window a straw tick some Blankets to lye under some flour and sutch things." Clearly excited to be out west, James takes up his pen and writes home.



COURTESY KATHRYN WEBB WIKERT



**Columbia, California, in 1856.** With a county population of 30,000, the city had dozens of stores and businesses. The greatest profits lay not in mining for gold, but in storekeeping and other services that catered to California's miners and their needs.

*St James [Nebraska Territory] Oct 28th 1858*

Dear Parents

[I am] writing a few lines to you to let you [know] of our safe arivel to our western home we found every thing all right we just got heir in the right time for it has rained every day since our arivel we have got our fier place bilt and it draws like blasis we have a heap of work to do in a short space of time every thing up side down and winter cuming on Jet [Chet] has ben trubled with the rumits [rheumatism] we kill any amount of chickens and ducks and . . . we live like pigs in the clover . . .

From your undutiful Son  
James Stageman

I forget to tel you of our trip up we were just eight days on the rode the first Sunday out it rained like blasis . . . the young catel drove first rate after we got them of[f] their range . . . pleas send me som post stamps and I will pay you . . .

**F**or Sarah and the other Latter-day Saints, the year 1859 is an eventful one in the Salt Lake Valley. U.S. President James Buchanan sends Col. Albert Sidney

Johnson's army to Utah to quell concerns about Mormon activity. At the order of Brigham Young, Salt Lake City residents evacuate to the south around Utah Lake.

*Lake City [Utah Territory] Feb. 28th 1859*

My dear Sister

'Tis but an hour or two since I received a few lines from you . . . I was wondering but a day or two ago if I ever again should hear from any of you . . . I am very sorry to hear that mother is so afflicted, you never told the cause of her lameness Give my kind love to her, & to father & tell them I should be so happy to see them. Tell them they had better start this spring & come here They will be obliged to come before long & that for provisions there is going to be a famine throughout the nations, & we are preparing for it here, & there is going to be wars, & great distress of nations, & you all (now mark my words) with the rest will soon say, I wish I were in Zion for that is the only place of safety. The prophecys are fast fulfilling. I am a Mormon still, firm as ever, though I have met with a great many ups & downs since I left you tongue could not tell. But I know the Lord has blessed me and does bless me every day. Now for the times —



[t]here is plenty of stir here since the soldiers came, everything is bringing a good price & money has been very plentiful. Clothing is very high indeed. My husband has gone to California after merchandise I expect him back in April he started the first of last month I am living in Lake City 30 miles south of Salt Lake City.

I have written to John several times. I cannot think why he does not write to me. how long has James been gone how lonesome father and mother must be, I do wish they were here. Tell them Charles Henry says he would like to see them. He sends his love to you all, he is now learning to write & he is writing on a piece of paper to send to you, it is only about three months or a little over since he commenced to learn his letters & he can now read first rate, it would astonish you to hear him. By the time he is five years old I think he will be able to write to you a letter if he keeps his health he is a smart boy, but he is small, & delicate at present . . .

. . . Sarah Bassett

*Columbia [California] May the 1 1859*

Dear father and mother as I have not herd from James for so long I think he must have left you and gone to the gold mines and I think it my duty to rite to you and inform you that I am alive and well at present . . . if James has not gone to the mines tell him to rite to me an send me all the particklers. it is very dull in california . . . the mines are worked out father I have had a dogs life for six years and I am tired of it I have not made any thing. I have tried hard but it was [no] go i have been sick a grate deel in this contry I think if nothing happens I will make a brake for new orleans this fall I think I can do better at home . . .

John Stageman . . .

**A**n unexplained gap of two years exists in the collection of Stageman letters. Now aged 69 and 72, Christopher and Mary are in poor health. James, ranching and mining in Colorado Territory, anguishes over how to assist them and writes to his brother-in-law Leonard Buckminster.

*Denver City Jan 30th 1861*

Dear brother

I was glad to heir from you but sorey to heir that father and mother were in such bad circumstances Bill Smith told me that father and mother were failing fast so I had made up my mind to cum home let the sacrifice be what it would my promice to mother

must be kept if god spairs thairs and my life a few weaks longer I hope that you will see that they sufer for neither help nor the comforts of life til I cum and I will make it all right

I shal be obliged to leive my ranch with chet for I cannot sel it for aney thing I have had som of my catle stole and it cums pretty near breaking me up tel father & mother keep up their curige a little while longer an I will be with them

. . . James Stageman . . .

*Runing Creak [near Pike's Peak, Colorado] April 1st 1861*

Dear parents

. . . I have not herd a word from you for seven months so I have cum to the conclusion that you have entirely forgotten me It is different with me you are my first and last thoughts

. . . I am still living on running creak I expect to farm this summer we ar building a new house to live in it is 26 ft by 17 to be to storys high times ar very hard heir at present but I hope they will get beter soon we have had a very fine winter heir I have been out in the montains nearly all winter hunting with out any shelter whatever the depes snow is fifteen inches our catel do first rate with out hay

I hope you are getting along as well with out me in your farming araingements as you did when I wis to home if I had the money you should never do another days [work] as long as you lived with out at your plesure I have tryed my best time and again to send you the money that I owed you but I could not get it but I will send to you as soon as I can

. . . I feel anxious about you scarcely anight pases lest I dream of you and home you may think I am home sick but it is not so.

If you wer well and young I should not want to cum home for years yet But lenard wrote you wer a lone with no one to help you

I must bring my leter to close hoping god will protect and spair your lives til I see you again is the prayer of your afectnect son.

James Stageman

*Running Creek [Colorado] June the 10th 1861*

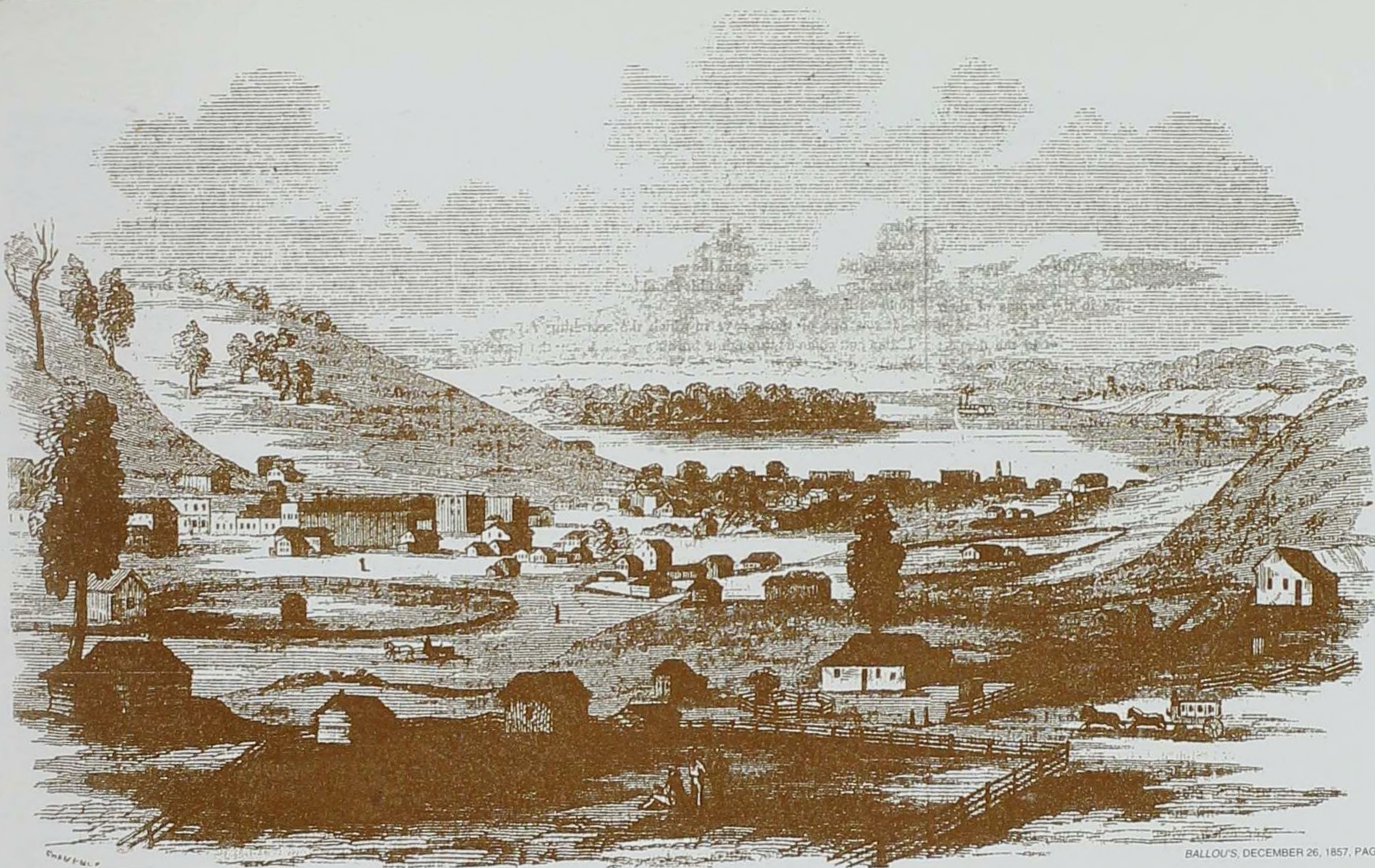
Dear brother[-in-law Leonard]

It is so long since I have herd from you that I think you ar all ded or have forgotten me for I have not herd a word from you since erly last fall . . .

I have not much time to write pleas give my love to father and mother mary an and the children and all enquiring frends

James Stageman . . .





BALLOU'S, DECEMBER 26, 1857, PAGE 412

**Council Bluffs in 1857 boasted of a population of 3,500, heavy steamboat trade, and promises of railroads.**

**B**y the fall of 1861, John has abandoned mining to work for a regular wage in the building trades. Commenting on Sarah's divorce (in 1859), he seems resigned to his own lot.

*Sacramento [California] November the 16 1861*

Dear brother[-in-law Leonard]

I take my pen in hand to inform you that I am in the land of the living . . . I have been traveling all summer . . . and have not made a cent and I have come to the conclusion that traveling will not pay and I am in the city of Sacramento now and shall remain as long as I am in the state please god I am making 18 Dollars per week I am working at painting and roofing I could make a great deal more if I would carry on business for my self but I have not quite confidence enough in my self. Leonard if I were married and settled down I could make money in this city but I shall never marry till I see Council Bluffs city but you cannot expect me to come till I get money enough to bring me there I suppose times is very dull there at present

you tell me that James is settled down in pikespeak. I think he [has] settled in a poor country but if he likes it that is all that he requires . . .

I was glad to hear from Sarah but was sorry to hear that she was living alone and that she [has] left

her husband may god bless her I thought when she got married to herself she would not live long with him it is curious [curious] how we are scattered around this world but it is gods will.

. . . Tell father that I long to see them again I suppose they thought I am single and nothing to keep me here but fortune has went against me or I would have been home long ago in '55 I lost a good deal of money, more than they have any idea of and I have been trying to make it again but it is no use. Fortune goes against me and I am contented to be poor . . .

I am keeping bachelor's hall cooking my own grub but it is my intention to come home as soon as I can sell the rifle I should like to see them again if it is god will I should like to see the old stomping ground again . . .

John Stageman

**J**ames leaves Colorado Territory in 1862, returning home to Iowa out of concern for his parents' health. Meanwhile, John continues to lament his struggle to save sufficient money to return home, a plight common to thousands of gold rushers in California.

*Sacramento Cali June the 30, 1862*

Der brother [James]

. . . i am still in Sacramento city working at painting I make my 21 dollars every week and still i cannot save any thing money will not prosper with me i never get a dollar without working hard for it

I do not know where it goes. i do not drink any





HYDRAULIC GOLD MINING BY WILLIAM HENRY JACKSON (SCOTT'S BLUFF NATIONAL MONUMENT)

Once miners exhausted streambed and placer deposits of gold, they set aside their individual tools and turned to costlier technologies—hydraulic mining (above) and quartz mining. Both required tremendous amounts of water, so water companies were organized, investors were found, and systems of dams, reservoirs, canals, and flumes were built. Aiming high-pressured water hoses at a hillside loosened tons of gravel each hour, which fell into sluices where it was washed. Quartz mining required drilling into a vein of quartz, bringing the rock to the surface, breaking the rock in stamp mills, and then washing it for the gold. Large companies operated the quartz mines, selling shares to investors and hiring wage labor.

thing stronger than water. James I am coming home this fall or in the spring if god is willing i hate to come home in the fall for this climate is so diferant from yours that i am a feared that i will get the runaticks [rheumatism] but I never was contented in this contry and I shall endeaver to leave it if poseble.

i send you my likeness and you can see wether i have altered or no. i have went through as much [as] any man in the country and have s[t]ood it as well as any . . . i hope you have done better a great deel than I have i can make money ware any other man can but I cannot save it that is the grate point i [c]ame very nere being rich in this country once but luck was against me an I lost it I do not want to be rich but I shold like now to prosper a little better . . . I rote to father about 6 weeks ago but I sopose father did not get it yet I told him about the grate flood that we had

in the country this winter it like to sweep every thing before it it knoct our little city into a cock hat that [is why] my painting is so floureshing this summer . . .

James what is your opinion about this war they must have have som very hot times in the States . . . I wish it was ended times would be ten times better in the States than they are here . . .

John Stageman

**I**n 1863, James again heads west. He visits Sarah in Salt Lake City before settling in Carson City, Nevada, to mine with Council Bluffs friends John and Tommy Ritter. In early 1864, James and John reunite for the first time in ten years and discuss returning home together that fall—though James is unwilling to borrow funds, as he did in Maryland, to return to Iowa.



Carson City [Nevada] Feber 15th 1864

Dear Parents

... I have not herd a word from home since I left ... me the poor wanderer It can't be that out of sight out of mind no I will never think that

I have received thre leters from John since I came heir ... he is cuming over to see me in the spring he wants to go to Reas River [in central Nevada] ... I would give more for a leter from home than you could imadgen

if you want any money Just Say So I can Send you sum any time you Shall never want while I have a doler If I [know] It. I would Send you a check in this leter, but I don't [know] wether you are alive or not

Dear mother I want you to keep a girl all the time get lissey if you can and if you cant get her get sum on[e] else keep a girl if you dont you must never expect to see me again for I Shall be very angry and father I would be very glad if you would keep a man to help you farm your place and keep it from going to weads so much and wen you answer this letter I will send you a hundrd dolers to comence with

I am doing prety at present chopping wood and mining together any thing that turns up I can make from \$75 to a hundred dolers per month chopping wood three dolers 50 cents per day mining [and] tuniling

george and tomy riter ar doing well they have not had a leter from home Since i came heir they want to [know] if they ar forgotten to ...

James Stageman

Carson city [Nevada] April 24th 1864

My dear parents

... I had the plesure last Sunday of meating with long absent Brother [John] I knowed him on sight but he did not know me he is well and sends his kind love to you both he is going to work in virginia city this sumer so we can see each other frequently he longs to see you both again before he dies

I got a few lines from Orsen Stoker the other day he said father was sick abed I was sorry to heir that but I hope he is well again I wrote you a letter some time ago and told you to write and I would send you some money to get along with so you need not work so hard but it seams that you have all forgotten me I did not com out heir with the intention of making a rase and enjoying it my self, but to shair it with you and try to make you happy and comfortabel the balence of your days I live hard and work hard for that purpose and nothing else you are all the world to me If you die before I get back Iowa will never [know] me agin John wants me to come home with

him in the fall but I told him I went home once dependent and it shall be the last time I would go through fire and water to serve you but to have it sed I came for your property is to much for my hart to bair when god knows it is not so ...

I have ben out heir allmost a year and have not herd a word from home yet ...

So goodbye for the present Father and Mother get som one to write for you ...

... your afectnect son

James Stageman

**The final letter in this saga is from James, now 31. He has received sad news and writes openly of his feelings. Considering possible routes back to Iowa, he wants to see Sarah before returning home.**

Carson City [Nevada] July 17th 64

Dear Brother[-in-law Leonard]

I received your kind leter on the 15th and was glad to heir from you I thought you had forgotten me I did not get your leter containing fathers death I herd it through Sarah She saw it in the papers It made me feel sory to think how he lived and died when he might have lived so happy if he had been more conformabel to the ways of the cuntrey I should have [been] so glad to have taken care of him in his old days but he always thought I wanted to cheat him. I did not want to cheat any body much les him

It dun me good to heir that mother was so well I hope God will spair our lives to see each other yet once more ...

I think I shall start [home] about the first of October I would flote around by new york if it was not for the sake of seeing Sarah She would be so disappointed ... John could not stand it in this cuntry He had to go back to calefornia. I shall pay him a visit before I cum home. I want to fetch him along if I can

You must please excuse this for my hands ar so hard and sore I cant do beter I have chopped about 400 cords of wood since new years besides mining I never loose a day without I am obliged to and it is using me up mighty fast I feel very old ... may god bless you all is the prayer of your Brother

James Stageman ...

THE CONFLICT of old ways and new ideas was never resolved between James and his father. James was willing to take risks; Christopher probably urged caution. Already nearly 60 when he first came to Iowa, perhaps



Christopher no longer wanted change of any magnitude.

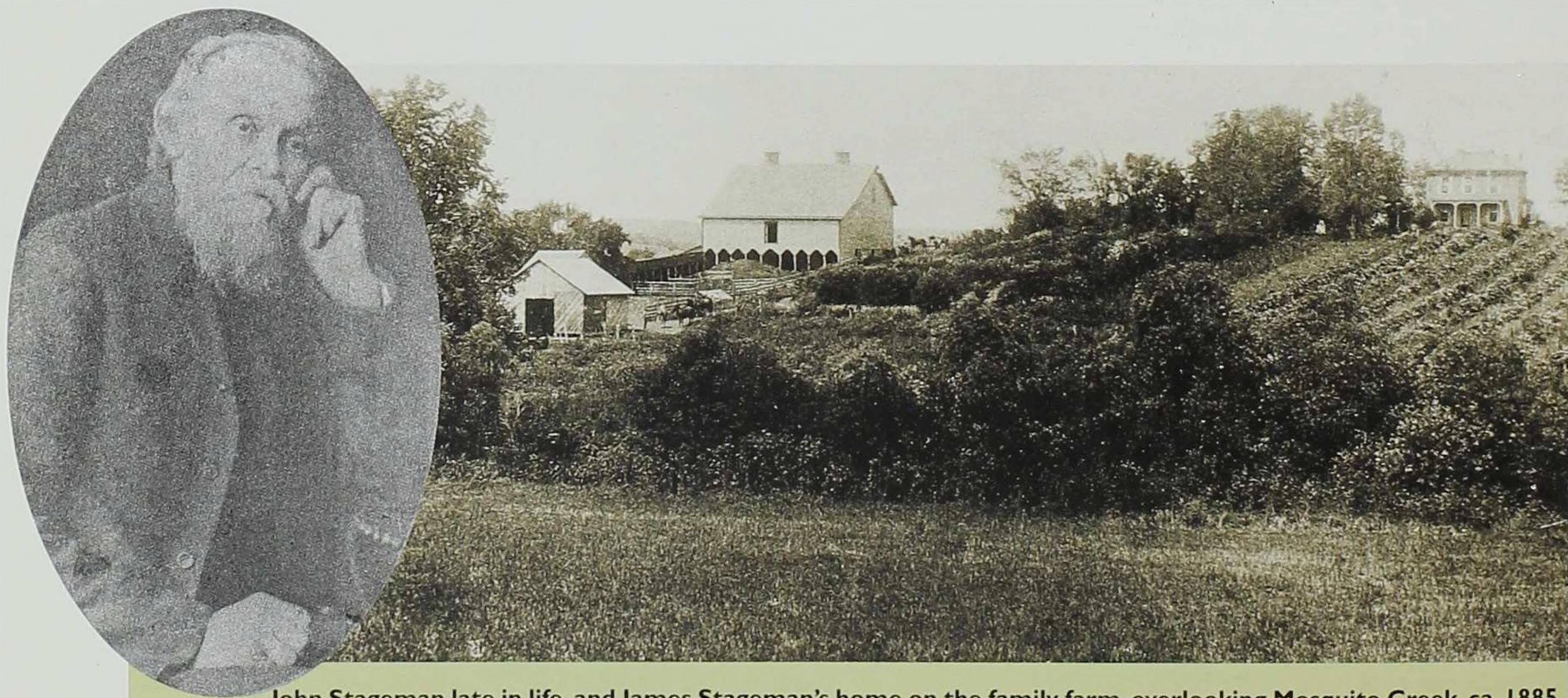
James's route home probably took him first to San Francisco, then by steamship to Nicaragua. According to family lore, he stitched his money into a vest for safe-keeping and never took it off, despite the steamy heat of crossing Lake Managua. Whether he took a steamer to New Orleans and then upriver to Iowa, or the sea route to New York and train to Iowa, is uncertain.

John returned to Iowa about the same time, and it is likely that the two brothers traveled home together. Now confident in his trade, John became a house builder in Council Bluffs. He married Eliza Sutherland and with her raised five children.

Sarah resided in Salt Lake City the remainder of her long life, her place of death only a few blocks from Temple Square. She is buried in the Salt Lake Cemetery on a hillside overlooking the Great Salt Lake Valley she loved so dearly.

James married Mary Williams and they shared their home that first year with James's mother until her death in 1865. James realized his dream of owning beautiful horses by raising and selling Percherons. The young couple settled into farming, reaping profits from the black gold of Iowa, its deep and fertile soil. They planted an orchard and a vineyard on the family farm and sold fruits and vegetables at the Omaha farmers market. About 1884, James and Mary constructed a large home for their family of nine children, with bricks made and fired on the farm. The house stands on a hill above Mosquito Creek and the site of the log cabin that the seven Stagemans first knew as their Iowa home. ♦

*Kathryn Webb Wikert teaches talented and gifted children in the Southeast Polk Community School District and is the great-great-granddaughter of Christopher and Mary Stageman.*



**John Stageman late in life, and James Stageman's home on the family farm, overlooking Mosquito Creek, ca. 1885.**

#### NOTE ON SOURCES

For this presentation of the Stageman letters, the original spelling and punctuation have been retained, with occasional interpolations in brackets for clarification and ease of reading. Ellipses indicate deletions. The letters are in the possession of the author. An unpublished manuscript by Mary Ellen Klopping Ryan, "James Christopher Stageman: Memoirs of Western Life (1890-1930)," recorded from first-person narratives, 1948-1955, was useful, as was Steve Bulman, "Images of Cumbria—Wigton Parish," <http://www.stevebulman9.co.uk/cumbria/wigtonf.html>, Feb. 23, 2001. Access to the Stageman farm abstract was provided by the present owner of the home and farm, Arlene Tiarks of Council Bluffs.

Secondary sources on California and its gold rush include: Malcolm J. Rohrbough, *Days of Gold: The California Gold Rush and the American Nation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997); John F. Burns, *Sacramento: Gold Rush Legacy, Metropolitan Destiny: An Illustrated History of Sacramento* (Carlsbad, CA: Heritage Media Corp., 1999); David L. Durham, *California Geographic Names* (Colovis, CA: Word Dancer Press, 1998); Bonita M. Cassel, *Columbia: A History of "The Gem of the Southern Mines"* (Arroyo Grande, CA: Bear Flag Books, 1995); *Miners & Business Men's Directory for ... Citizens of Tuolumne ...* (Columbia, CA, 1856; rep. 1976). An interview with Floyd D. P. Oydegaard, of Columbia Booksellers & Stationers, Columbia, CA, on March 18, 2002, was helpful.

On the Mormons in Salt Lake City, see: Norma B. Ricketts, *Melissa's Journey with the Mormon Battalion: The Western Odyssey of Melissa Burton Coray: 1846-1848* (Salt Lake City: International Society Daughters of Utah Pioneers, 1994); and Scott R. Christensen, *Sagwitch: Shoshone Chieftain, Mormon Elder, 1822-1887* (Logan: Utah State University Press, 1999).

County and town histories for Pottawattamie County and Council Bluffs were useful for establishing the local context, specifically: Charles H. Babbitt, *Early Days at Council Bluffs* (Washington, D.C.: Byron S. Adams, 1916); O. L. Baskin and Company, *History of Pottawattamie County, Iowa: 1882* (Chicago: O. L. Baskin, 1883); Homer H. Field, *History of Pottawattamie County*, vol. 1 (Chicago: S. J. Clarke, 1907); William J. Harsha, *Story of Iowa* (Omaha: Central West Co., 1890). For an Iowa context, see Leland L. Sage, *A History of Iowa* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1974); and Susan Easton Black, *Iowa Mormon Trails: A Self-guiding Tour of the Iowa Mormon Trail Across Iowa* (Brigham Young University and Iowa Mormon Trails Assn., 1995). Annotations to the original manuscript are held in the *Iowa Heritage Illustrated* production files, SHSI (Iowa City).



# *The daunting role of family archivist*

"Who will put together the Stageman history?" worried my mother in her final days.

"I can do that," I replied. "You're almost finished, aren't you?"

"Well, yes . . ." she answered.

And, so, the torch was passed, and I became the fifth-generation caretaker of the green wooden writing box brought with the Christopher and Mary (Dring) Stageman family from England in 1840. The responsibility transferred from Christopher to James to Mark to Ruth had now been given to me.

Opening the roughhewn box for the first time after my mother's passing, I felt as if I were lifting the lid of a treasure chest. An air of anticipation surrounded me as summer sunlight exposed the contents. First I carefully removed the English ledger filled with entries written in Christopher Stageman's own hand. Then I gently lifted out the stack of family letters from the 19th century. I leafed past the familiar gold rush letters and then gasped with excitement at discovering Sarah's Salt Lake City letters, written in a fine hand, the ink now faded. I had forgotten these letters existed. As I shuffled through the thin, blue stationery, out fell Christopher's pocket-sized list of personal possessions, the value of each assigned in English pounds. Was this a list of items brought with the family from England, where Christopher had been employed by Sir Wastel Brisco on his Crofton Hall estate? Or were they items brought from Fairhill, Maryland, to Kanesville, Iowa, as the family followed the Mormon movement?

Recognition sank in. The history of the Stageman family was nowhere near finished. There were too many pieces of the puzzle yet to be solved. My mother knew that, I suddenly realized. Now, almost nine years later, I can more fully appreciate being entrusted with the daunting role of family archivist.

Pursuing the pieces to the family puzzle through clues provided by this treasured collection of letters has led me on a personal journey of discovery and opened up a world of people, places, and opportunities I could never have imagined. Transcribing the letters from the handwritten copies into a word-for-word typed text filled a summer and pulled me into the lives of the authors. I became entranced by the universality of emotions expressed by the letter writers.

By the following summer, I knew that I wanted a deeper sense of the landscapes of their lives, and, so, the family history jaunts began. Traveling to the sites of origin of the letters has led me on delightful trips to the rolling pastures of Fair Hill, Maryland; to the loess hills of western Iowa, where the houses of James and John Stageman still stand; to the wagon ruts visible at "parting of the ways" near South Pass, Wyoming; to the "rose of the desert," Salt Lake City; across the Great Basin on the California Trail to rugged Carson City and Virginia City; and finally, on into California gold rush country in the foothills of the Sierra Nevada Mountains. "Family vacations" have taken on new meaning.

Looking beyond the names and the dates on my family tree and actually retracing the steps of my ancestors have given me a greater understanding of my heritage and led me to an appreciation of their struggles and joys. I hope that you, too, will find the puzzling out of family history to be a wondrous journey, with bounteous rewards.

— Kathryn Webb Wikert



# Reading the Past

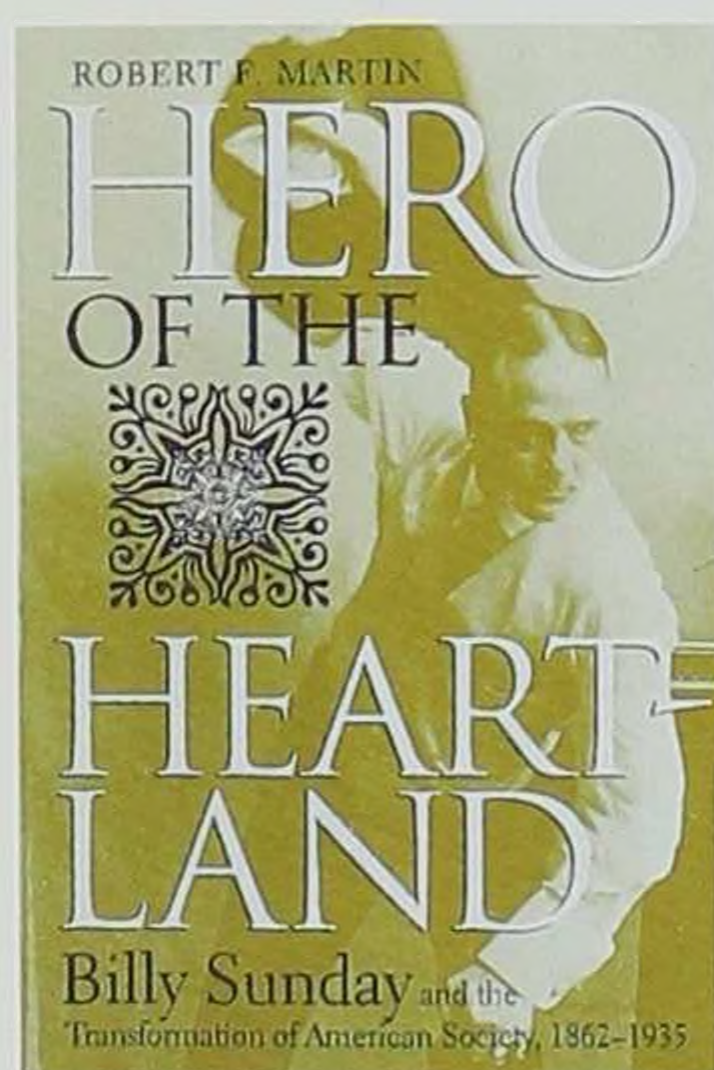
One of Iowa's most colorful native characters—and one of the nation's most popular Protestant evangelists—is the subject of *Hero of the Heartland: Billy Sunday and the Transformation of American Society, 1862–1935*, by University of Northern Iowa history professor Robert F. Martin. As a revival preacher, Billy Sunday was probably most renowned for his onstage antics. As one reporter has noted, “he would shed his coat, then his vest, then his tie, and finally roll up his sleeves as he whipped back and forth, crouching, shaking his fist, springing, leaping and falling in an endless series of imitations. He would impersonate a sinner trying to reach heaven like a ball player sliding for home—and illustrate by running and sliding the length of the improvised tabernacle stage.”

Billy Sunday's life and his early evangelistic career both began in Iowa. His early years in Iowa were not happy ones. After his father died while serving in the Civil War,

he and one of his brothers spent a couple of years in orphanages in Glenwood and Davenport before moving in with their grandfather on his farm near Ames. His initial claim to a degree of national recognition came as a major league baseball player, first in Chicago as a protégé of fellow Iowan Adrian “Cap” Anson, then in Pittsburgh. In Chicago he experienced a religious conversion and, equally significant for his future career, married Helen “Nell” Thompson. Eventually he gave up his modestly successful professional baseball career to take up full-time work as an evangelist. Beginning with small crusades in Iowa and surrounding states, Sunday gradually developed a reputation as a successful evangelist and

established society. Sunday's rather undistinguished major league baseball career took place during an era that saw a dramatic rise in the popularity of professional sports, from which Sunday drew important lessons and lively stories that engaged his later audiences. Sunday's successful evangelistic career also paralleled the emergence of a “cult of masculinity” and “muscular Christianity,” which joined Theodore Roosevelt and such institutions as the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) in seeking to address concerns that Christianity had been “feminized” in recent decades and that American manhood in general was in a perilous state. Martin draws other fascinating connections between Sunday's rising popularity and the changing nature of Protestant evangelism, the rise of big business, and the Progressive movement. In one of the book's most interesting and unique twists, Martin also illustrates how Sunday's career reflected the trajectory of the reputation of the region from which he came. From the turn of the century to World War I, when Sunday's popularity was at its height, the Midwest was often seen as the region that epitomized the best of American culture. By the 1920s and 1930s, as Martin says, “both Billy Sunday and the Middle West seemed to millions increasingly quaint, ludicrous, or irrelevant.” In short, Martin seems to suggest that Sunday's appeal to the masses came as much or more from the remarkable parallels between some of the most significant historical trends of his time and his message, style, and practices as it did from the apparently idiosyncratic onstage antics on which previous historians have focused.

In addition to his ability to help readers make the connection between Billy Sunday's life and his times when it's all too easy to see him as an anomaly, Martin also resists the temptation to pass easy judgment on a character whose flaws will be evident to most readers. Martin's interpretations reflect an empathy that helps readers understand Sunday's appeal, rather than an antipathy that would undermine such understanding. And Martin writes well for a scholar determined to maintain an appropriate scholarly distance from his subject. He does not focus on Sunday's bizarre antics, but his subject is colorful enough for some of that color to come through anyway. Readers will find much food for thought, as well as an introduction to a fascinating historical character, in this engaging book, which masterfully situates one of Iowa's liveliest native sons in his place and time. ♦



*Hero of the Heartland: Billy Sunday and the Transformation of American Society, 1862–1935*, by Robert F. Martin. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002. xi, 163 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$27.95 cloth.

expanded into ever larger urban markets. By 1910, he was the most successful evangelist in the United States. In a ten-week campaign in New York City in 1917, he claimed to have converted nearly 100,000 souls, with more than 100,000 more in Boston and Chicago.

Such is the main outline of Billy Sunday's life and career. That outline is clearly portrayed in Martin's book, but this is not a comprehensive biography. Rather than a dramatic and detailed account of Billy Sunday's fascinating life and spectacular career, Martin's book is really a series of artfully crafted and well-integrated interpretive essays relating aspects of Sunday's life to larger movements in American society during his lifetime. Beginning with Sunday's troubled childhood in Iowa as a Civil War orphan, Martin shows how Sunday absorbed a distinctive set of midwestern values that developed at a time when the region was making a rapid transition from frontier to

Robert F. Martin won the 2003 Benjamin F. Shambaugh Award for *Hero of the Heartland*. With that award the State Historical Society of Iowa recognized the work as the most significant book on Iowa history published in 2002.

Marvin Bergman is editor of the *Annals of Iowa*. His column, “Reading the Past,” introduces selected books to our readers.



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# One in a Million

Among the millions of items in the collections of the State Historical Society of Iowa are these materials from the Louden Machinery Company in Fairfield, Iowa. Farmers constructing or modernizing barns—or, for that matter, hog houses, horse stables, or chicken houses—turned to Louden for building plans and equipment, all designed for greater efficiency, sanitation, productivity, and safety on the farm.

The 1917 catalog (*below*) even tapped into the huge new market of automobile owners. Adapting a few of its barn products for garages, Louden advertised its sliding-door apparatus and tracks suitable for garage doors and superior to bulky swinging doors, and metal roof ventilators for preventing dangerous automobile gases from building up inside.

Louden catalogs are filled with practical information for farmers, and glowing testimonials from satisfied customers all over the U.S. and Canada. The issues challenging farmers early in the 20th century are evident in Louden slogans like these: "Keep the Boys on the Farm. Modern Barn Equipment Helps" and "Sanitation is the Keynote of Successful Dairy Farming." Every page demonstrates the long-standing relationships between agriculture and industry in Iowa.

Browsing through catalogs is always fun, but if you also enjoy traveling back in time, leaf through the trade catalogs in the libraries of the State Historical Society, in Iowa City and Des Moines. —*The Editor*

ALL THREE: SHS (IOWA CITY)

